

Keeping our Promise: Honoring Aboriginal Enhancement Agreements and Becoming Allies for
Aboriginal Education

by

Roberta Harris
B.Ed., University of British Columbia, 1999

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University of Victoria

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Abstract

This project proposes to raise awareness about initiatives that have been undertaken to increase Aboriginal student achievement in British Columbia and Canada. Aboriginal student success continues to be an ongoing concern both provincially and federally. This paper will examine possible historical causes for low success rates and suggest ways to combat the negative effects of colonialism and attempts at assimilation by becoming allies for Aboriginal education. Acknowledging the need for change involves educating ourselves about the history of Aboriginal education, current initiatives to increase student success and finding ways in which we can contribute. To become allies we must accept the responsibility of adopting the goals of Aboriginal Education Enhancement Agreements (EA's), responding to the 94 recommendations of Canada's Truth and Reconciliation Commission and implementing the First People's Principles of Learning into our practice.

Introduction

As an educator I often reflect on the year that has passed and wonder how I could improve at ensuring Aboriginal student achievement. At times I feel successful and other times I feel as though I have failed. Contemplating, I pondered on where I was effective and the possible reasons why. I concluded that student achievement was a result of the relevance of the lessons, my relationship with students and the method of delivery.

As I gained more knowledge, I realized the areas I experienced success were related to the basic goals of the School District # 85, Vancouver Island North's 2010-2015 Aboriginal Education Enhancement Agreement (EA). The EA goals include: providing students with a sense of belonging, showing respect for their culture, increasing student success rates, integrating Aboriginal content into all subject areas and fostering relationships with parents, families and communities (Aboriginal Enhancement Agreement, SD # 85, pp. 8-9).

This is the second agreement to be signed and a third one will be developed for the years 2016-2021. Fifty-six school districts in British Columbia (B.C.) are involved in

EA's (BC Ministry of Education: School Districts with Enhancement Agreements, 2015). As far back as 1999, a "memorandum of understanding" was signed by the Chiefs Action Committee, the provincial Minister of Education, the federal Minister of Indian and Northern Affairs, and the President of the BC Teacher's Federation who acknowledged "Aboriginal learners are not experiencing school success in British Columbia [and] we state our intention to work together within the mandates of our respective organizations to improve school success" (BC Ministry of Education, Aboriginal Education Enhancement Agreements, 1999).

Sixteen years later, the roots of low achievement continue to be considered. The long lasting effects of attending residential schools are seen as one of the conceivable reasons for the lack of success among Aboriginal students. The earliest document to suggest assimilating Indians through education was written in 1844 stating the intent to "get rid of the Indian problem [and] continue until there is not a single Indian in Canada that has not been absorbed into the body politic" (Legacy of Hope Foundation, 2014, p. 2).

My name is Roberta Harris, my Kwakwaka'wakw name is Tsolali' lakw, which means "Born to Give," I am an intermediate teacher at the Alert Bay Elementary School. Our school consists of approximately 60 students from kindergarten to grade seven. I currently teach grade 6/7 and am the Learning Assistance Resource Teacher. My most recent class consisted of 24 students, 23 of which are of First Nation's descent. Of those students, 16 will be transitioning to high school in the fall. The closest secondary school is in Port McNeill, which is a 45-minute ferry ride away.

The village of Alert Bay, also known as Cormorant Island, is a rural community located off the northeastern shore of Vancouver Island, and consists of approximately 1000 people. “It lies within the traditional territory of the ‘N̄amgis First Nation and is one of the 16 remaining Kwak’wala speaking nations known as the Kwakw̄ak̄awakw (Vodden, K. 2006, p. 2). We are a close-knit community that is rich in culture and First Nation’s values. Our population fluctuates, as does our economy.

Many people have left the community in search of sustainable employment and adequate housing. The Cormorant Island Community Economic Profile Report (CIECEPR, 2014) states, “Education levels on Cormorant Island are lower than the provincial average, 63% of Cormorant Island residents have completed high school or higher, compared to 83% for the province as a whole” (CIECEPR, 2014, p. 12). We are an aging population and are “missing a large portion of 20-40 year olds...[there are] less young people and more older people than the provincial average” (CIECEPR, 2014, p. 11).

There are high levels of unemployment in our community which has been attributed to “the decline of the commercial fishing industry from the 1990’s onward...resulting in a challenge to the Village’s economy and cascading impacts like population loss, the claw-back of government services...and higher unemployment rates” (CIECEPR, 2014, p. 14). Many of the jobs available are through the ‘N̄amgis First Nation and the Village of Alert Bay.

There are two schools in Alert Bay, the band operated T’lusalagi’lakw School and the Alert Bay Elementary School where I am employed. At both schools the majority of

the students and staff are familiar with the customs and traditions of the Kwakwaka'wakw people. Cultural values and traditions are carried over into everyday school life, which is encouraged by our local EA. Our school motto is Maya'xala, which loosely translated means respect for people, property, and one's self. We strongly believe that everyone has a gift and as a school do our best to enhance and honor each child's strengths by working together as a team and a family.

This type of school was not typical when I was growing up. I was an Aboriginal student who did not experience success. There were many people that encouraged me, but school was not important to me. I only got as far as grade 10. As you can imagine the idea of becoming a teacher wasn't a thought, much less a reality. After many years of upgrading and realizing that "I was smart," I attended the Native Indian (Indigenous) Teacher Education Program (NITEP) at the University of British Columbia from 1993 to 1999. As I was training, the idea of being a teacher was still very foreign to me, but lo and behold, here I am.

In time, I began teaching in my home community. Many of the children were closely related to me so I felt an enormous responsibility and connection to them since they were my family. As I progressed in my career I realized that many of their needs weren't being met. This was devastating to me because I am the one getting them ready for high school!

This is when I recognized the need to become an ally for Aboriginal education. I saw myself as privileged because I was able to leave my home community, acquire an education and come back to a well paying job despite all the odds I had against me.

While teaching I felt I was on the outside looking in when it came to fully meeting the needs of my students. I could relate to the feelings of frustration and failure as I had experienced the same thing growing up as a child. I felt that teachers did not understand me, much less know anything about me.

These memories caused me to reflect on my teaching style, my method of delivery and the relationship to my students to examine how I might be better at preparing them for their educational journey. I also reflected on my own adult learning experiences.

Throughout my education in the NITEP program I learned about who I was and where my gifts were. I also learned the importance of knowing about where I come from. Education was empowering! I became an education junkie! I truly enjoyed learning. I was like a sponge and absorbed as much information as I could. I was learning about things that were relevant to me, that gave me pride and honored my culture and history.

I was also learning about the injustices that we as Aboriginal people endured. When I left my home community at 23 years old, I had no idea about the *Indian Act of 1876*, the attempts at assimilation, or the effects residential schools had on our communities, even though each affected me personally! The sad part was, that I had to leave home to realize the significance of all these things. It was difficult to sustain a positive perspective when I became aware of how my rights were taken away when my mom married my dad, due to the “compulsory enfranchisement of Aboriginal women who married non-Aboriginal men” (The Indian Act: Historical Overview, 2015, 1951 Revision of the Indian Act section, para. 6), why we live on reserves, and why we were

forced to attend residential schools that forbade us to speak our language or practice our cultural traditions.

As I progressed through the NITEP program, I learned the importance of education, and the power it has to facilitate change. I learned the value of integrating First Nation's content into the curriculum and forging relationships with families and communities to create a sense of belonging. Reciprocity was a common theme. When on a practicum or school visit we were always encouraged to "give something back." This concept remained embedded in my mind and became a natural part of my practice.

In my previous position as an Aboriginal Helping Teacher in Surrey, B.C. (SD # 36), I conducted workshops for both students and teachers throughout the district. I soon found there was a need for supporting educators with integrating Aboriginal content and accessing and utilizing resources that were relevant, genuine and accurate. Here was my chance to give back!

During my presentations I experienced a variety of emotions and attitudes towards what I was teaching, especially when it came to the topic of residential schools. It was essential that I open with the statement that I was here to educate, not to hate. It was extremely important for me to come from a positive perspective and not from a place of shame or blame. At times, it was difficult when I realized that racism and ignorance continues to exist among both children and adults.

On the other hand, I also experienced compassion, understanding, and genuine care. There were many people that wanted to learn, to understand and facilitate change. I believe education is the key to empowering Aboriginal students. Research and studies

have shown education holds the key to success. Paulette Regan “believes that education is not simply about the transfer of knowledge but is a transformative experiential learning that empowers people to make change in the world” (Regan, 2010, p. 23).

There are many scholars who agree on how to go about ensuring Aboriginal student achievement along with many strategies and principles to consider as we teach. Ginsberg (2005) shares a “motivational framework for culturally responsive teaching [that]... also serves as a template for recognizing strengths in educational practice and providing clues to develop those strengths” (p. 222). The framework consists of 4 motivational conditions that include essential questions on how to establish inclusion, how to develop a favorable disposition toward learning through personal relevance and choice, and how to enhance meaning and engender competence (Ginsberg, 2005, p. 222).

Of course there will be times and instances where we will face challenges, obstacles and even failure, but I believe if we are coming from a good place with a good heart and good intentions, (known as *ixdalkwala* in our language) our students will know that we care and aspire to achieve. If we continue to raise the bar for them and for ourselves and implement the resources and research that encourages Aboriginal achievement I believe we can inspire students to succeed.

This project will focus on ways to provide Aboriginal students with a quality education that promotes success and respects their history, values and way of life. I would like to share my ideas, resources and strategies to meet the goals of the EA, to implement the recommendations of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRCC: Calls to Action, 2015, pp. 2-3), and to honor the rights of Indigenous peoples as declared

and adopted by the United Nations (United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, 2011, Article 14-15, p. 7). I aim to inspire educators to become allies for Aboriginal education.

Brief History of Aboriginal Education

In 1920, the *Indian Act of 1876* was revised to make it mandatory for children between the ages of 7 and 15 to attend residential schools. Refusal to do so could result in imprisonment. The earliest school opened in 1831 and the last one closed in 1996 (Legacy of Hope Foundation, 2014, pp. 7-8). Throughout this time span, residential schools stripped many students of their dignity and their freedom, which led to irreplaceable loss of culture, language and traditions. The effects persist, “the legacy of poverty, ineffective parenting, abuse, grief, and health issues-can appear throughout the entire community, not just in the lives of the Survivors” (Legacy of Hope Foundation, 2014, p. 9).

Separated from their families and prohibited from speaking their native languages and practicing their culture, the vast majority of the over 150,000 children who attended these schools experienced neglect and suffering. The impacts of the sexual, mental, and physical abuse, shame, and deprivation endured at Indian Residential Schools continue to affect generations of Survivors, their families, and communities today. (Legacy of Hope Foundation, 2014, p. 1)

Recognition of these intergenerational effects soon led to a settlement agreement (RSSA) with residential school students in Canada. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (TRCC) was formed in response to the implementation of “the 2007 Indian Residential Schools Settlement Agreement [where] former students who attended these

institutions on a residential basis were eligible to make compensation claims (TRCC, *They Came for the Children*, 2012, p. 1). The TRCC was required to “report on the history, purpose, operation, and supervision of the residential school system, the effects and consequences of the system, and its ongoing legacy, as required by the Commission’s mandate” (TRCC, 2012, p. iii).

This section examines the “effects and consequences” of attending residential school as they relate to Aboriginal student success today. The emphasis is on how “the Canadian government took on heavy responsibilities when it established residential schools, they knew...the schools were failing to provide children with the education they needed and the care they deserved” (TRCC, *They Came for the Children*, 2012, p. 1.)

Historically, “the quality of education was low in comparison to non-Aboriginal schools. In 1930...only 3 of 100 Aboriginal students managed to advance past grade six, and few found themselves prepared for life after school” (Legacy of Hope Foundation, 2014, p. 8). Families continue to be affected. “Generations of Aboriginal peoples today have memories of trauma, neglect, shame, and poverty. Those traumatized by their experiences in the residential schools suffered pervasive loss: loss of identity, loss of family, loss of language and loss of culture” (Legacy of Hope Foundation, p. 8).

The negative effects of the latter are still obvious in our communities, our province and our country especially in respect to dependency. “The “relationship between the effects of social suffering, unresolved psychophysical harms of historical trauma and cultural dislocation have created a situation in which the opportunities for a self-sufficient, healthy and autonomous life for First Nations people ... are extremely

limited” (Alfred, 2009, p. 42).

Generational loss can be seen as a direct link to the low success rates of Aboriginal students. “Educators, including those that are Aboriginal, must be aware of the effects of historical racism because it is a contributor to the lack of success of Aboriginal students” (Ledoux, 2006, p. 275). Educators need also be aware of the resilience of Aboriginal people, who despite the attempts at assimilation and colonialism “have retained their language and their culture and continue to work toward healing and reconciliation” (Hope and Healing, 2014, p. 1).

There have been numerous apologies issued to Aboriginal people regarding their negative experience at residential school. The TRCC website lists apologies that were made by The Canadian House of Commons, the RCMP, and the Presbyterian, Catholic and United churches. (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada: Reconciliation section). In the introduction to Paulette Regan’s (2010) book, *Unsettling the Settler Within*, Taiaiake Alfred refers to this time as a “global era of apology” (p. iv) and summarizes:

Words of apology and reconciliation are not enough to make the significant social and political change that is so sorely needed. Words must be accompanied by concrete action at all levels of Canadian society. If such actions are to be transformative, they cannot be predicated on good intentions but must be rooted instead in a fundamental recognition of the human dignity and rights to freedom of self-determining Indigenous peoples. (Regan, 2010, p. xi)

The United Nations took action to assist in the transformation of Aboriginal education when they adopted the Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples in 2007. Articles

14 and 15 (2011) list the rights of Indigenous people to control their own educational systems, have access to culture and language, and respect for the “diversity and dignity of their cultures, traditions, histories, and aspirations which shall be appropriately reflected in education and public information” (p. 7).

The TRCC focuses on education as an integral part of the healing journey of residential school survivors. There is a focus on Aboriginal student achievement and acknowledgement of the disparity between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people both in education and employment. 4 of the 12 principles in the Call to Action document include: “improving education attainment levels and success rates, developing culturally appropriate curricula, protecting the right to Aboriginal languages and enabling parental and community responsibility, control, and accountability” (TRCC: Calls to Action, 2015, p. 2). The TRCC’s recommendations are especially relevant to our community and surrounding nations and are in sync with the EA goals.

Many of our Kwakwaka’wakw people have been personally affected by the residential school system that was in operation in Alert Bay from 1877 to 1975 (Anglican Church, General Synod Archives, 2008, p. 1-2). The St. Michael’s Residential School, built in 1929 and recently demolished in February 2015, stood as a constant reminder of the effects on our community and the failure of the education system. Even so, much is being done to improve the success rates of Aboriginal students. People are working together to transform the outcome of Aboriginal education. Groups are collaborating and advocating for Aboriginal students by sharing ideas, knowledge, and strategies to initiate success. Besides implementing the goals of enhancement agreements, school communities are adopting the First Peoples Principles of Learning, (FPPOL) which

“reflects a respectful and holistic approach to teaching and learning” (FNESC, 2015, Learning First Peoples Classroom Resources section)

FNESC was formed in 1992 by a group of visionary people who “determined the need for a First Nations-controlled collective organization focused on advancing quality education for all First Nations learners...in B.C.,” (FNESC, 2015, About FNESC section, para. 1). The committee also “strives to build partnerships with federal and provincial agencies and other relevant stakeholders in order to communicate the issues and concerns of BC First Nations and ensure they are meaningfully addressed” (FNESC, 2015, About FNESC section, para. 3).

FNESC plays an important role in the creation and implementation of Aboriginal Education Enhancement Agreements and partners with schools, communities and the BC Ministry of Education “to give First Nations a stronger voice in the education of their children and improve educational outcomes for First Nations learners (FNESC 2015, Local Education Agreements section, para. 2). FNESC also provides relevant and authentic resources for integrating and teaching Aboriginal content into the curriculum (FNESC 2015, Resources section).

There are ample recommendations and research from a variety of stakeholders and organizations to support the need for action by educators to assist in enhancing the success of Aboriginal students. To take action in transforming education for Aboriginal students I believe educators must accept responsibility for becoming allies for Aboriginal education by aspiring to meet the needs of Aboriginal students.

Many parties recognize and agree that Aboriginal student success has been an ongoing concern in Canada for decades. There is an exorbitant amount of research that is focused in this area. Scholars and organizations from across the country laboriously attempt to identify the reasons for low academic achievement among Aboriginal students.

There are ample reports, recommendations, suggestions, strategies committees and commissions that recognize the situation and explore ways in which to improve. “For more than thirty years, both federal and provincial governments have acknowledged the low educational success rates of Canada’s Aboriginal students” (Ledoux, 2006, p. 266).

Aman describes the minimal progress over the last three decades as “troubling” (2008, p. 365). It will take time and commitment to dissipate the disparity between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students, “a 2004 report from the auditor general of Canada estimates from current trends that it will take up to 28 years for the proportion of high school graduates in First Nations communities to reach comparable national levels” (Wotherspoon, 2006, pp. 673).

Parties continue to work together to close the gap and provide students with equal educational opportunities. In 1998 the province of British Columbia founded an Aboriginal Education Partners Group, which in 1999 led to the signing of the Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with the BC Chiefs Action Committee, the Minister of Indian and Northern Affairs, the Minister of Education, the First Nation Schools Association, the BC College of Teachers, the BC School Trustees Association, the BC Teachers’ Federation, and the BC Principals and Vice Principals’ Association.

An Education Jurisdiction Framework Agreement was signed in 2006 to

recognize First Nations jurisdiction over education on First Nation land and continue the commitment to working together to increase student achievement. BC's Education plan, launched in October 2011, recognized the need to "continue to work with Aboriginal communities through partnerships like Aboriginal Enhancement Agreements with school districts to focus on the needs of Aboriginal students and improve learning outcomes" (BC Ed. Plan, 2011, p. 3).

In 2012 the Tripartite Education Framework Agreement was signed and all parties agreed "to deliver quality education programs and services, which meet standards that allow students where applicable, to transfer without academic penalty, at similar levels of achievement, between First Nation Schools and Provincial Public Schools" (AANDC: Tripartite Education Framework Agreement, 2012, pp. 2-3). This agreement is important locally as our elementary students attend band-operated schools and transition to provincial public schools for high school.

As Aman (2008) has declared, "the trend toward higher school completion rates is not consistent in every school district, community, or high school in BC. There is wide variation across the province and often highly variable results in high schools from year to year" (p. 366). To create awareness and facilitate action to increase success rates, the SD # 85, EA, proposed that educators in our district adopt and embrace the four goals that have been designed to improve Aboriginal student achievement using the Bighouse (GUKW'DSI) framework:

The framework is based upon many of the traditional values that continue to provide strength for Aboriginal communities and families. Similar to our role when participating in Bighouse ceremonies, we each have a responsibility to

support, encourage, validate and ‘witness’ the development and growth of our students. (SD # 85, EA, 2010/2015, p. 3)

The objective is to inspire educators to accept their role in improving Aboriginal student success by adopting a culturally responsive teaching approach. I have found that many educators avoid integrating Aboriginal content and collaborating with First Nations people. “While the literature acknowledges that some improvements in Aboriginal education have been made, the school system continues to be based on a Eurocentric model of education...the Aboriginal child continues to be caught between two cultures and is therefore outside of and between both” (Ledoux, 2006, p. 270).

Students remember the educators that support and encourage them. “Those votes of confidence in ability, or proactive actions within the classroom ... are all positive experiences that Indigenous students point to when they speak of their instructors that aided them” (Pidgeon, Munoz, Kirkness, & Archibald, 2013, p. 19). It is crucial that educators and other stakeholders recognize their capability in influencing Aboriginal student success. Contributing to change in our education system will involve considerable effort and commitment.

Ledoux (2006) found “culturally based education recognizes teachers are the immediate agents of contact and therefore on the front lines of school improvement” (p. 275). I have found in my personal experience that education is power. “Culturally responsive teaching (CRT) is used to empower students intellectually, socially, emotionally, and politically by the use of cultural references that impart knowledge, skills and attitudes” (Ladson-Billings 1994 as cited in Santamaria, 2009, p. 222). Empowering students by learning from them and acknowledging their wisdom in turn, motivates them

to learn.

The “Accord on Indigenous Education” which was signed by each Dean of Education in Canada in 2010:

Aims to actualize the goal of having the teachers who work with our children be more responsible, knowledgeable, and respectful of Indigenous people and education...this reciprocal vision of responsibility to Aboriginal children and their non-Aboriginal classmates, in which all learn together, valuing different knowledge systems and ways of being, provides a pathway forward to the next seven generations. (Pidgeon et al., 2013, p. 19)

Building a pathway will require a commitment to examine where we as educators stand in the education process. In my experience there are many educators who recognize the need for change, accept the responsibility of implementing the goals of EA’s and go the extra mile to ensure success for all students. They genuinely care and are willing to develop the skills, acquire the knowledge and form relationships to increase student achievement.

Culturally responsive teaching involves embracing the goals of the enhancement agreement, implementing the recommendations of the TRCC, and recognizing the rights of Indigenous people in relation to education. We will accept our responsibility for providing the support and guidance students need to succeed by being open to trying new things, taking risks and doing our best to increase student success.

For Aboriginal students to have a sense of belonging in school, teachers must do more than simply introduce Aboriginal content into the curriculum; they must also adopt Aboriginal methods and values so that students may come to know their own identity and potential from within the understanding of their culture.”

(Barnhardt 1990; Leavitt 1994; & Lipka 1990, as cited in Ledoux, 2006, p. 276)

Unfortunately there are many educators and stakeholders that are not aware of culturally responsive teaching practices. In studying educator's perspectives about Aboriginal Enhancement Agreements in the Burnaby School district, the authors found information to be more accessible at the "higher levels of the district organization" and respondents believed the "general teaching population does not have a good working knowledge or awareness of the AEEA" (p. 42.)

Districts are looking at ways to increase the knowledge and understanding of EA's and offer professional development opportunities, community support and access to Aboriginal Education departments. There will be educators that resent having to implement the goals of EA's and change can be difficult. Teachers question why they should have to integrate Aboriginal content or change their practice. Teachers that believe Aboriginal students "require special consideration" (Wotherspoon, 2006, p. 683), do not accept responsibility for their learning and put the onus on schools to meet their needs. It is recognized that when "non-Indigenous teachers are tasked to rework the curriculum to make it more relevant to Indigenous students' cultures, this usually means that Indigenous knowledges are decontextualized and parceled into pieces that teachers can "fit" into Eurocentric disciplines...in an attempt to "fix" the problem of Indigenous student "under achievement" (Madden, Higgins, & Korteweg, 2013, p. 219).

If we want to increase Aboriginal student achievement, the message is clear on what needs to be done, the next step is figuring out how to implement the practice of culturally responsive pedagogy. "It is only when Aboriginal students find a place and

belonging in the school system that achievement levels will improve” (Ledoux, 2006, p. 267). Apparently, awareness and education are the first steps to becoming an ally. Allies will attempt to understand the needs of Aboriginal students and will “have usually worked their way to their insights through their own experience, reflection and efforts towards social change” (Bishop 2015, Chapter 8: Step 5, p. 2).

Ledoux (2006) states, “dozens of reports on Aboriginal issues released over several decades ...have concluded that education, in both their present and previous forms, have been used to ensure the cultural, economic, political, and social oppression of Canada’s Aboriginal peoples” (p. 268). The attempts at civilization and colonialism are seen as major factors for lack of success among Aboriginal students. “The ‘civilizing’ intention of Aboriginal education in BC was a tragic and violent act.... This incredibly violent disruption of communities and families has left an unforgivable legacy on future generations” (White, Budai, Mathew, Richson Deighan, & Gill, 2012, p. 45).

Relationships between schools and families must be re-established in order to increase Aboriginal student success. Educators need to understand the mistrust that exists towards the education system due to the “negative legacy of abuse and trauma inflicted upon Aboriginal people by the colonial residential school system” (White et al., 2012, p. 45). Many Aboriginal people have had negative experiences when learning about our history from a public school perspective. Jo-Ann Archibald shared her high school educational experience “where Indian people were only portrayed as war-faring, violent, and savage” (Pidgeon et al., 2013, p. 9). This type of portrayal is far too common in our education system. To combat them, we as an education system must realize “teachers have a large role to play in the project of decolonization” (White et al., 2012, p. 54).

Battiste (2002) describes this as:

A process that includes raising the collective voice of Indigenous peoples, exposing the injustices in our colonial history, deconstructing the past by critically examining the social, political, economic and emotional reasons for the silencing of Aboriginal voices in Canadian history, legitimating the voices and experiences of Aboriginal people in the curriculum, recognizing it as a dynamic context of knowledge and knowing and communicating the emotional journey that such explorations will generate (p. 20).

Stakeholders and interested parties are working together to break the cycle of inequality. “Educational equity will be achieved when Aboriginal children see themselves and their people reflected in the curriculum and feel a sense of belonging in the school system” (Ledoux, 2006, p. 273).

To take action and become allies we must learn about the history of Aboriginal people to empower ourselves to generate change. As allies we need to “take responsibility for helping to solve problems of historical injustice without taking on individual guilt.... and look for what [we] can do, with others, in a strategic way and try to accept the limitations beyond that” (Bishop, 2015; Ch. 8: Step 5, p. 2). We as educators hold the power and autonomy to provide Aboriginal students with the base they need to encourage success in the education system. We are the people on the front lines who are able to implement the goals of the EA and the recommendations of the TRCC. “In addition to the urgent call for national unity, we need to ensure the protection of the next seven generations’ right to good quality education that truly honours Indigenous ways of knowing and being, languages, values, and cultures” (Pidgeon et al., 2013, p. 5).

We are the people who are in the position to become allies for Aboriginal

education. As educators we have the responsibility to understand the needs of Aboriginal students and educate ourselves about the causes for low student achievement. We must be aware that Aboriginal people have their own way of educating their children and recognize that Elders are the keepers of knowledge and as Ledoux (2006) found are “shown a special respect” (p. 271). Traditionally, elders prepared children for their lives “as positive, participating and contributing members of their society” (Ledoux, 2006, p. 271) which in collaboration with the elders, families and communities is what we should strive to accomplish as well.

Bishop (2015), describes allies as “people who recognize the unearned privilege they receive from society’s patterns of injustice and take responsibility for changing these patterns” (p. 1). “To change we must learn everything we can by reading, asking questions, and listening. Our ignorance is seen as part of the oppression” (Bishop, 2015, Step 13, p. 3). Although I don’t like to think of myself as oppressed because I am an Aboriginal person, it’s a fact that cannot be ignored. Becoming an ally involves the desire to “learn, reflect on, and understand the effects of oppression, take action with others, take risks and walk towards your fear to find your power” (Excerpt from “Becoming an Ally Breaking the Cycle of Oppression” 2015, p. 1).

Many educators devote time and energy into becoming allies but often encounter issues that become barriers to the pathway of success. These include poor attendance, lack of parental involvement and Aboriginal peoples’ mistrust of the education system due to “the negative legacy of abuse and trauma inflicted upon [them] by the colonial residential school system” (White, et al., 2012, p. 45).

Other barriers include meeting the needs of students while still meeting all of the requirements of the current education system. “Educators struggle with the challenges of providing education which is meaningful and relevant, and at the same time mindful of the outcomes mandated by the provincial government” (Ledoux, 2006, p. 267).

It is my hope the success rates of Aboriginal students will increase, as educators feel more confident about implementing the goals of the EA and community ties are strengthened. I feel the community will feel empowered and be more inclined to become involved in Aboriginal education initiatives. Our communities will become healthier and more people will seek out higher education and attend college and university. People will adopt a positive attitude towards education and begin to heal from the injustices they have historically endured. The mistrust towards education will dissipate and relationships will continue to be forged to further enhance Aboriginal student achievement. Communities will come together to share, discuss, collaborate and celebrate their successes and further explore how we can continue to flourish in education.

Meeting the 4 Goals of the Enhancement Agreement by Utilizing Culturally Relevant Resources

I chose to create lesson plans based on the book *Secret of the Dance* because it depicts a prominent person in our Kwakwākwakw community that students can relate to and be proud of. The book is depicted in Kingcome, BC where many of our students’ families reside. The story depicts the history of the law against the potlatch in an age appropriate and thought provoking way.

The book, *Secret of the Dance* is an excellent example of a culturally relevant resource that can be utilized to meet the goals of the Aboriginal Education Enhancement

Agreement in many different ways.

The lessons were delivered in a variety of ways using various teaching strategies. I introduced the lesson using a Know/Wonder/Learn chart and asked the students to share their knowledge about the potlatch. Students were engaged and interested as many of them practice their culture and have dances and names from the Gukw'dzi (Bighouse). They were also asked to share what they wondered about the potlatch. Many good questions were put forward.

When this activity was complete students shared their knowledge and their questions as a group. I was very pleased with the engagement of students and their ability to share their ideas and their knowledge. This lesson proved to me that students were more engaged when learning about things that were relevant to them. This activity honored their culture and their knowledge and created a sense of belonging as they shared their names, dances and heritage with the rest of their class.

Even students who would normally be reluctant to participate were anxious to learn, contribute to the conversation and join the group in recording and presenting their ideas. I found this to be very encouraging and rewarding while at the same time learning a lot about my students.

I read the story aloud to my class. There were many areas to discuss, as it is rich in culture, history, language and territory. We discussed the area, the traditions, the stories and the dances. We examined the illustrations and how they depicted the era of when the story took place. We researched the clothing the characters were wearing to determine what year the story took place.

We talked briefly about the potlatch ban but focused mainly on Alfred Scow's life as a young boy. The next lesson focused solely on Alfred Scow and the accomplishments he made during his lifetime. We talked about who he was as a role model, his standing in our community and our nation and how his achievements paved the road for Aboriginal people.

The story was reintroduced focusing on the law prohibiting the potlatch. We discussed the notion of defiance and its relation to the survival of our culture and our language. We focused on the irony of Alfred Scow becoming a lawyer and later a judge. We briefly touched on the Indian Act and the possible reasons the potlatch law was introduced.

As a class we discussed at length the strength of the culture and the resilience of the people and their ability to maintain the traditions of the Kwakwākwakw people despite the government's attempt at assimilation through the potlatch ban.

We began to study the Indian Act and the topic of residential schools and the laws that governed Aboriginal people and how it relates to us today. Students were asked to reflect and empathize how things might be if the attempts at assimilation succeeded.

Educational strategies include: small group discussions, KWL charts, comprehension activities, various artwork, class discussions, individual research and oral presentations. All of the lessons generally went well. Students were engaged and interested in the topic and participated fully.

Implications for Practice

The lessons were well received by students. They were engaged, interested, motivated and curious. They were eager to participate and share their knowledge and experience. They were confident and proud to share who they were and where they come from. Students who were familiar with Kingcome Inlet and the surrounding areas confidently shared their history with the class about the culture and traditions that they have personally experienced. I created these lessons with the 4 goals of SD # 85 Aboriginal Education Enhancement Agreement in mind to illustrate how easily they can be met.

GOAL 1: All Aboriginal students will experience a sense of belonging and respect through the recognition and honouring of their culture, history and values.

- The book *Secret of the Dance*, incorporates the Kwakwala language, culture, territory and history of the Kwakwākwakw people into the curriculum.
- The book depicts places, animals, people, and traditions students can relate to which initiates a sense of pride and encourages them to share the knowledge and experience they associate to the story.
- Provides the opportunity to access local resource people and possible relatives to access information about how the potlatch ban affected them and other personal experience.
- Provides an opportunity to access more personal and in-depth information about Judge Alfred Scow who is a prominent Kwakwākwakw person.
- Recognizing traditional teachings as relevant to the current education system by comparing the laws that existed when Judge Alfred Scow was a young boy and the initiatives taken in schools today that honor culture and language.

GOAL 2: All partners will work towards increasing the level of academic success for each Aboriginal student.

- Students were engaged and interested in the topic, which motivated them to

participate in class discussions, communicate their ideas in written and presentation form.

- The story depicts the strength and resilience of the Kwakw̓ak̓wakw people and their/our ability to sustain our language, culture and traditions.
- The story instills a sense of pride and portrays Judge Alfred Scow as a positive role model who has accomplished so much as an Aboriginal person especially in the area of education.

GOAL 3: All students will experience Aboriginal content in all subject areas and at all grade levels.

- This story can be integrated into subjects and grades across the curriculum
- Social Studies: Mapping, place names, the history of the Indian Act, the potlatch ban, and the history of residential schools.
- Language Arts: Comprehension, writing, reflecting, oral history, and oral presentations.
- Science: Connection to the earth, stewardship to the land, connection to the animals, food preparation, and fishing.
- Language and Culture: The Kwakwala language and the stories and traditions of the Kwakw̓ak̓wakw people are depicted throughout the story.
- Fine Arts: Reader's Theatre, visual arts, integrate cultural dances and songs into the story in collaboration with the Cultural Teacher

GOAL 4: All partners will work together to foster success for Aboriginal students through relationship building and partnerships with parents, families and communities.

- Build relationships and partnerships with community members who have knowledge and experience with the potlatch ban.
- Invite family members of Judge Alfred Scow to share their memories of him
- Plan a trip to the U'Mista Cultural Centre to further explore the culture and traditions of the Kwakw̓ak̓wakw people.

Recommendations for Educators

The book *Secret of the Dance* is specific to the Kwakw̓ak̓wakw people and depicts a

history that shows the control the government had over Aboriginal people and their everyday lives. To teach about this topic can be a difficult challenge. It is recommended before taking on such a task to ensure that resources used are culturally relevant and accurate. Collaborating with community members and families to ensure the information is correct and age appropriate before proceeding with lesson plans is essential to the success of meeting the goals of the educational enhancement agreement. Respecting the diversity of people's experience is also important when considering the history of Aboriginal people. Many people have different experiences surrounding the ban of the potlatch or around the topic of residential schools. There are many different perspectives that need to be considered and respected.

Students expressed sadness at the thought of not being able to practice their culture. They asked difficult questions that could be difficult to answer. They sometimes also expressed anger at the government for trying to control and eliminate our culture. In these instances it was important to focus on the positive and the strength and resilience of the people that maintained their language and way of life. There are also many instances where this was not the case which is a reality that may surface as students begin to inquire about other nations that may not have been so successful at retaining their traditions. The truth of our history must be told, but always in an age appropriate manner, which I believe this book does well.

Limitations of the Project

Although most of the lessons were successful and well received there were some aspects of the project that presented a challenge. The content of the book was a difficult topic to discuss. Teaching students about the potlatch ban could be seen as a controversial issue that could evoke negative feelings and even anger. This is why I chose to focus specifically on the life of Judge Alfred Scow and all of that he accomplished despite the potlatch ban. I also focused on the resilience of the people and the strength of our culture and traditions today. It took a conscious

effort to avoid fostering anger and resentment towards the government due to the laws that were imposed upon Aboriginal people.

The book does a good job of including the Kwakwala language, but to anyone not familiar with the language, it would be very easy to mispronounce many of the words that are included in the story. I had to ask my students for help when pronouncing certain words, which is a strength that a teacher could tap into to enhance a child's sense of belonging. I would suggest getting help from someone who fluently speaks the language.

These lesson plans provided for this project are specific to the Kwakwala speaking people but can be adapted to use in any classroom. This book is an example of the type of resource that can be used in a variety of different ways to integrate Aboriginal content into the classroom. Although it is specific to an area in BC the ban against ceremonies was in effect across Canada. This book could be used as an introduction to teaching about the laws imposed against Aboriginal people to study how many traditions actually survived despite the ban.

Another limitation to teaching these lesson plans was time. With the ongoing pressure of meeting the requirements of the curriculum that needs to be covered, I felt time was always an issue. We needed to cover a certain amount of information over a limited amount of time, so I felt some of the lessons were rushed and did not teach as much as I would have liked about the Indian Act and the impact it had on Aboriginal people.

There was not a lot of age appropriate information or resources regarding the Indian Act so many of the lessons were not as well received as others. Students quickly got bored when there was a lot of reading or research to be completed. Participation was not as enthusiastic as the previous lessons. In hindsight I would definitely use a different method of delivery and more age appropriate literature or possibly more guest speakers.

There were many other aspects to consider while delivering these lessons. Different

levels of learning continue to be a factor requiring differentiated instruction and adaptations. Absenteeism is also a barrier that is an ongoing limitation. Student engagement in all aspects of the lesson also posed some difficulty. Some students did express that parts of the unit were boring, especially when it came to writing. Most students were engaged and enjoyed the majority of the lessons. They were able to communicate what they had learned and reflect on how their thinking and awareness had changed as a result of what they had learned. They were able to empathize how it must have felt to be forbidden to practice their culture and well aware of how it had survived.

In closing, I found this to be a truly rewarding experience that strengthens my belief that in order to empower Aboriginal students to succeed we must honor their culture and traditions by keeping our promise and honoring our agreement to change the way we think and teach by embracing the goals of Aboriginal Enhancement Agreements and becoming allies for Aboriginal education.

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