

Research Project Report

The Talking Stick Project Aboriginal Education in the TDSB Investigating Stories of Teaching and Learning

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Overview & Research Context

Urban Aboriginal Education in the Toronto District School Board

[T]o think along with other Indians in the hope of making a reflective contribution to the conversation among Indian educators about defining and implementing an education worthy of our children and our ancestors. (Eber Hampton, 1995. p. 5)

The alienation and marginalization of Aboriginal students, families and communities from institutions of formal schooling is well documented (Kirkness and Bowman, 1992; Battiste, 1998; Dion, 2000). Students in urban settings confront particular problems: they may not be recognized as Aboriginal students, they may not see themselves represented in the teaching population, they may not see themselves represented in the curriculum. If recognized at all, they may be expected to have access to and be willing to share cultural knowledge; they may be asked to speak for all Aboriginal people. They attend school in spite of a long, negative and hurtful relationship between Aboriginal people and schooling.

School Board administrators, teachers and other Board employees in urban settings also confront particular challenges, including: identification of Aboriginal student populations, delivery of programs when students are frequently dispersed across a range of schools, a teaching population that lacks knowledge of Aboriginal subject material and the challenge of engaging families and communities who may be understandably resistant having experienced a legacy of negative associations with educational institutions.

These challenges are especially evident in the TDSB (Toronto District School Board), where a large urban Aboriginal population is dispersed across the Greater Toronto Area. Despite the size of Toronto's Aboriginal population (amongst the largest in Canada), there is no concentrated Aboriginal neighbourhood or community. Aboriginal people are often rendered invisible in Toronto's bustling multicultural cityscape. The impact for Aboriginal students is often one of alienation. "Lacking a definable urban Aboriginal community with whom they can identify, students are often either isolated in their schools and communities or are 'hidden in plain view', reluctant to self-identify" (TDSB, 2008).

As the TDSB has noted, "meeting the needs of such students in an urban context requires not only innovative approaches to program delivery and support but outreach to Aboriginal families and communities as well" (TDSB, 2008). Since at least 2003, the TDSB has undertaken a number of Aboriginal education initiatives, including the establishment of the Aboriginal Community Advisory Council (ACAC), the creation of a centralized Aboriginal Education Centre under the direction of a central coordinating principal, as well as curriculum development, surveys of students, parents, and teachers, community outreach, and partnership building.

Urban Aboriginal Education Pilot Project

In 2007, the Ontario Ministry of Education (OME) launched a pilot project to develop Urban Aboriginal Education (UAE) models with First Nation, Métis and Inuit students, families and communities. Along with Lakehead District School Board and Simcoe County District School Board, the TDSB was identified as a pilot site. The project began in September 2008 and was originally slated to run until June 2009. In the Spring of 2009, the project was extended for an additional 12 months.

The activities related to the pilot projects seek to achieve the following goals, as outlined in the Ontario First Nation, Métis and Inuit Education Policy Framework:

- High levels of student achievement,
- Reduced gaps in student achievement, and
- High levels of public confidence.

The specific goals of the Urban Aboriginal Education Pilot Project at the TDSB site include:

- A. Enhancing Aboriginal student achievement,
- B. Increasing Aboriginal community participation in the TDSB,
- C. Improving partnerships with Aboriginal Community organizations and service providers,
- D. Developing curriculum resources that reflect Aboriginal people's experiences and perspectives, and
- E. Accomplishing professional development.

Research Sub-committee and The *Talking Stick Project*

The TDSB UAE Steering Committee established a research sub-committee to a) review and provide feedback on research to inform the work of the TDSB, b) to provide liaison and advisory support to the provincial researcher and c) to inform the development of a broader evaluation framework. In March 2009 Principal Investigator Dr. Susan Dion was contracted to conduct the evaluation of the TDSB pilot project. This evaluation and research project was titled the *Talking Stick Project*.

Looking specifically at implementation and outcomes, the goals of the *Talking Stick Project* were to investigate, evaluate and learn from the work undertaken and accomplished by the UAE Pilot Project. This research will inform both the UAE Steering Committee and the TDSB about the ways in which the pilot project was both successful and challenged in accomplishing its goals.

The *Talking Stick Project* seeks to accomplish the following objectives:

1. Investigate and evaluate the efficacy of the UAE Pilot Project in increasing Aboriginal student performance.
2. Analyze and assess the effectiveness of the project in enhancing Aboriginal community engagement including parents, families, community organizations and support services.
3. Identify and analyze the challenges and barriers encountered in implementation of the project and achievement of its' aims.
4. Identify and understand project strategies, resources and other factors contributing to positive outcomes of the pilot project.
5. Investigate the project's effectiveness in building educator confidence and competency as well as system capacity to respond to the needs of Aboriginal students, families and communities.
6. Working in collaboration with both the steering committee and the Provincial Evaluator, Andrea Johnston Research Inc., the Talking Stick research team will respond to the requirements of the provincial research project and contribute to the provincial work of documenting urban models of Aboriginal Education with case studies and effective practices that can be adapted and implemented in other urban settings

The following research questions guide the *Talking Stick Project*:

1. In what ways did participation in pilot project activities and events impact Aboriginal student achievement? Is there evidence of this change in Aboriginal students' performance on province-wide assessments in reading, writing and mathematics? Do classroom teachers recognize a change in students' performance and or changes in attitudes?
2. How do students who participated in pilot project activities understand their Aboriginality? Did participating students register a significant change in their attitudes toward education and/or toward their understanding of themselves as Aboriginal people?
3. Were partnerships between the TDSB and Aboriginal community organizations and service providers established and/or improved? In what ways do those partnerships serve to enhance Aboriginal student achievement and or reduce Aboriginal students' experience of alienation and or marginalization within the TDSB?
4. Was the pilot project successful in developing curriculum and having that curriculum

integrated into classrooms? In addition to curriculum development what other professional development projects were undertaken and did those projects contribute to teachers' confidence and capacity for teaching Aboriginal subject material, and for responding to the needs of Aboriginal students, families and communities?

5. The pilot project set out to enhance parent and family engagement in TDSB. Did parents and family members experience increased engagement and did this engagement have a positive impact on students?
6. What did members of the pilot project steering committee learn from participation in the project? In what ways will this learning be useful in their ongoing work in the service of Aboriginal students, families and communities in both the TDSB and the Aboriginal community in Toronto?
7. Considering the variety of activities undertaken by the pilot project, which activities were most successful, what contributed to their success? What activities were most challenging and what contributed to the challenges.

The Talking Stick Project

Research Design

Writing about Indigenous approaches to research and theory, Maori scholar Linda Tuhiwai Smith explains that decolonization "is about centering our concerns and world view and then coming to know and understand theory and research from our own perspectives and for our own purposes" (1999, p.39). In keeping with Indigenous approaches to research, the *Talking Stick Project* is guided by the following principles: respect for existing knowledge and relationships within community, respect for Indigenous worldviews and traditions, action in support of the development of capacity and skill building, collaboration throughout the process, community ownership and control over gathering of information and process, and ongoing response to community requests for involvement (Absolon and Wilett, 2004).

These commitments have guided the design and implementation of the research, and our adoption of a multi-method approach including talking circles, interviews, participant observation and on-the-spot interviews. The selected methods all emphasize the importance of narrative and collective knowledge production, embracing a qualitative approach. This focus on the rich complexity of participants' own stories about the successes and challenges of the pilot project will be enhanced by a review of demographic data on student success (i.e. grades, retention and completion rates) in the final stages of the research project.

Through regular contact with the staff of the UAE Pilot Project and the TDSB research sub-committee, we have ensured that the research is conducted in an appropriate way, respectful of participants' concerns with confidentiality, Indigenous approaches to research and the goals of the UAE Pilot Project site. The in-depth interviews, regularly scheduled talking circles, and ongoing participant observation have provided a sense of the project as it unfolds and shifts, enabling researchers (and staff members) to track success, challenge, and change over the course of the pilot project. This has also provided the opportunity for researchers and staff members to develop a respectful and trusting rapport.

Community trust has also been built through rigorous adherence to the principles of informed consent and confidentiality, which has included painstaking review of transcripts for confidentiality and accuracy, as well as returning interview transcripts to participants for their review. Although this is a time-consuming process, it has reassured participants that their contributions and their words are valuable and respected. This valuing of the contributions of participants has also been indicated through the provision of small honoraria, where appropriate. The importance of gifting is central to Indigenous approaches to knowledge and respectful relationships.

In Talking Circles, comprised of 3-8 participants each, researchers ensured that refreshments were available, and that attention was paid to appropriate ways to begin and

close the gatherings. This created an important tone for the Talking Circles, signalling that a comfortable time and space was set aside to reflect individually and collectively on the important work at hand. Staff members have also noted the importance of the Talking Circles to providing space and time for reflection and connection with other members of the Pilot Project team. In this way, the research project has provided a reciprocal support of the Aboriginal Education Centre. This commitment to reciprocity is central to Indigenous conceptions of good working relationships, and has created an important sense of trust and openness between researchers and the staff of the pilot project.

These explicit elements of research design were further enhanced by ongoing reflection of the researchers, through team meetings and the beginnings of analysis. Analysis on the data has focused on emergent themes, tracking continuity and change over the course of the pilot project. The central themes and emerging findings are detailed below.

Work Completed To Date

Talking Circles	4
Interviews	
Teachers/Principals	34
Students	20
UAEPP Staff	5
Steering Committee Members	3
Community Members	4
Participant Observation	9
School Audits	15

Approach to Evaluation

Over the course of interviews and talking circles, parents, teachers, students, community members and pilot project staff have repeatedly emphasized that quantitative indicators of success (grades, completion rates) are insufficient indicators of students success, and that they are not necessarily commensurate with Indigenous conceptions of learning. In this initial phase of the research and evaluation component of the project we have focussed on more qualitative indicators of success. At this time our attention is focussed on the impact the pilot project is having within the board; we are attending to what the staff can tell us about what they have accomplished; and we are listening to the voices of the youth.

This focus includes:

- transformations in the school board environment,
- enhancing appropriate and respectful knowledge about Indigenous peoples, history and culture,
- meaningful and appropriate incorporation of Indigenous issues, and
- staff development.

The second phase of our evaluation will include quantitative indicators with specific attention to individual Aboriginal student performance. We will incorporate these findings into the summative evaluation.

For this report, the following questions have framed our approach to evaluation:

- How has learning been accomplished? What kinds of learning have been accomplished?
- To what degree are relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people (students, teachers, community members) being transformed?
- Do teachers feel prepared and/or supported in their attempts to fulfill this curricular requirement?
- Are representations of Aboriginal people, history and culture in TDSB schools respectful and appropriate?
- What have the UAE Pilot Project Staff and participants identified as positive change, what supports positive change and what are the obstacles to change? How can these be addressed?

Emerging Findings

General Observations

Overall, we have observed a number of exciting successes from the UAE Pilot Project. Teachers, parents, administrators and students have noted that Aboriginal Education seems to be finally receiving attention and burgeoning visibility. The strength of the Aboriginal community rallying around the UAE Pilot Project and the cooperative spirit of the UAE Pilot Project staff has been noted as a particular strength of this work. Aboriginal students, teachers, staff, parents and community members are increasingly recognizing the Aboriginal Education Centre as an important resource. This is beginning to counter the sense of alienation and distrust of schooling prevalent within Toronto's Aboriginal community. A number of the students interviewed suggested that if it were not for the intervention and ongoing support of UAE Pilot Project staff they would have left school altogether.

Despite these important accomplishments (further detailed in 'Indicators of success' below), many research participants noted the tremendous challenges to the work of the pilot project. Outlined below, these challenges include historical, systemic and ongoing inequity. As such, they are sobering indicators of the amount of work still to be done. This work is being taken up by pilot project staff, and they are working in collaboration with members of the TDSB to accomplish change in service of creating positive school experiences for Aboriginal students that will ultimately support improved student performance.

Indicators of Success

Attention to Aboriginal Education

One of the central indicators of success for many of the research participants is the increasing visibility of Indigenous issues and subject material. There is a new attentiveness to having Aboriginal issues heard and reflected. Both the Superintendent responsible for Aboriginal Education and the Central Coordinating Principal for Aboriginal Education noted signs of the shifting place and responsibility for Aboriginal education.

But what I do see is a shift institutionally in terms, like a big institution [i.e. the TDSB] in terms of understanding and advocating for Aboriginal education. And I see it when I go to the Associate Director and I say, "Hey, listen, I'm still having trouble getting this thing moved through." She said, "Of course, let me help you," and then gets back to me. (Staff Interview #6, p.7)

In the explanation of this shift school board member stated:

Yea, I don't think anybody's going, "Oh here they come, they're going to talk about Aboriginal education. Duck." Like I don't think anybody's doing that, and quite honestly, it's the opposite. Honestly, you know, people say, "So, how's it going? How can I help?" And that has been the shift... . (Staff Interview #6, p. 7)

While in the past Aboriginal Education was considered a "separate" issue of concern to few, these comments suggest that at least in part due to the work of the UAE PP, Aboriginal Education is becoming a shared priority for all members of the school board.

Student Success

As previously explained, indicators of student success embraced by the Aboriginal community in Toronto emphasize qualitative indicators of success. Participants want students to get good grades and finish school and they recognize the links between emotional support, positive identity and good grades. One staff member reported,

They're happy - happier not to say that they do not have blips and bad times but those incidents are fewer and far between and the students are also able to recover from those in a more productive way instead of tail spinning and getting worse, they are able to come out of it. I've had a VP call and say you know what I am so glad that you've been coming because the student has improved dramatically. Because this student had a lot of anger issues and I am not working on the anger issues, Freya is, but academically he is feeling more successful and more supported and so that compliments what she is doing. (Staff Interview #2, p.15).

During our interviews with students (2 Talking Circles and Individual interviews) it became clear that the students themselves have an understanding of these links. In our first Talking Circle with them, students began by describing their previous school experiences and the impact of working closely with staff at the AEC.

I'll talk about my school experiences. I had a rough time in school. I had a hard time attending, and, meeting up with [UAE PP Staff] and working with her has really got me into the mindset of going back to school and moving on in my life. So I had a rough past, but things are getting better, for sure. (Staff TC#1, p.2)

Another young woman stated,

So I was in and out of school all the time. I either dropped out, got expelled or got suspended or just never wanted to go. And [UAE PP Staff] helped me stay in school. (Student & Youth TC#1, p.3)

This support exceeded the provision of tutoring or academic resources, and focused on emotional support, as well as basic survival: finding housing, groceries, employment, assistance negotiating aspects of social assistance.

Um, I probably would have dropped out of school, from Gray Stone, and I probably wouldn't have, like, looked at GED or anything if it wasn't for [UAE PP Staff support]. And working once a week. Like, that really helps a lot because being on welfare sucks. And I don't know, she helps. Summer jobs and all that stuff. (Student & Youth TC#1, p.10)

Student success was also indicated by students' ability to imagine and envision their future success.

She gave me—she made me feel more positive. Like, I actually saw my future. Like, I started looking forward to my future, I guess. I don't know what else to say. (Student & Youth TC#1, p.9)

During the TDSB's Aboriginal Awareness month the UAE PP staff organized an assembly for Aboriginal students. For one student in particular, this event was highly significant. Lyle (a pseudonym) had recently arrived in the city from a reserve community in northern Ontario. One of the teachers at his school took him to the assembly and from that point Lyle became involved in various pilot project activities and events. During an interview Lyle explained that when he first arrived, *"It was kinda like a new city, like I didn't ... like it was a new city, I felt isolated, I didn't know anybody."* And he went on to say, *"Yeah I was skipping earlier, like I was doing good at first then slowing down, skipping, and then like the assembly went on, and then I felt comfortable in school again (Student & Youth Interview #1, p.8).*

When asked about what he learned from being involved with the UAE PP activities Lyle responded,

It makes me want to, it makes me want to stay connected with the Youth Leadership Group. It makes me wanna like form other groups like this for other kids to feel what I am feeling, to be, to feel like you are in a group that helps other people. [Participation in the Youth Group] makes you feel good about yourself and its [the younger] kids. I don't know, it makes me proud of them once they learn something, you feel like you accomplished something. (Student & Youth Interview #1, p.13)

Providing Aboriginal students with opportunities to make a contribution to their community is significant. Having had previous experiences of alienation from institutions of formal schooling, opportunities to make a concrete contribution provide affirmation, letting students know that they do indeed belong and have a place in school.

In her reflection on the York Career Day event, co-organized with the Native Women's Resource Centre, one staff member noted the importance of mentorship,

...it really touches the students because when people talk about - especially people who are in sort of those positions of authority, talk about their own obstacles that they've overcome to get where they are, I think it could be really—it can mean a lot. And I remember one student said, 'I never even thought about going to university before this moment. Like I never even contemplated that it would be possible for me to go to university.' And then through that—just that day, started to [imagine that]. It was the full spectrum, 'cause someone came from --- with her transcript. So she was set, you know. She was, like, she knew what she wanted. She was there to figure it out, and... And then there were other students that had never even thought about it. (Staff Interview #1, p. 7)

The work of pilot project staff requires that they build meaningful relationships of trust with students, and this often precedes any attention to academic skills. Recognizing this has been central to the success of staff in assisting students with academic success. One staff member explained,

So we go in and I find out if they want the support and it is mostly gaining trust, before you can do - student support it is a lot of [other staff]'s work, but I have to do that as well. Because if I walk in with books and say: 'hey, we are doing math today' they are just going to look at me and they are not going to do anything. It's the same as another teacher coming in. So it is a lot of talking, we bring in snacks, we will bring in, depending on their age, coloring, stickers - and you know just kinda get to know each other. And then the trust comes the confidence comes and then we can start to work on the academics. (Staff Interview #2, p.10)

Additionally, pilot project staff members are experiencing success in supporting students in finding their own strengths, and in nurturing supportive peer networks. As Lyle noted,

What I learned, umm I learned leadership, like when I first moved here, I didn't know leadership but now they [UAE PP Staff] got me into a youth program. I learnt how to talk to kids. I learnt how to react when you try to, I, I don't know, like kids always don't want to listen, right? And, I gotta find a way to reverse that, and make them listen. I found a way. Like be friends to them instead of being a teacher kinda way, (inaudible) so they listen to their buddies, so I did that. (Student & Youth Interview #1, p.7)

During the first year of the project the UAE PP staff had a relatively short amount of time to work with students. Due to hiring constraints the Student Success Teacher and Child and Youth worker weren't hired until early in 2009. In spite of this short period of time, the

staff had a profound and positive impact on the lives of these young people. During the second year of the project, these students are continuing their involvement with UAE PP and we look forward to speaking with them again in the spring.

Building Trust

The relationships between Aboriginal parents, community members and educational institutions are often fraught by the legacy of colonization. One of the greatest successes of the UAE PP has been the provision of a liaison with the Aboriginal community. As one staff member noted, this support often takes the form of supporting parents, and recognizing their mistrust of schools.

I have had parents where you come in and work and you can see the tension in their bodies and you ask what they would like to see and then you explain what you are able to do and then its like - oh- we are so glad - and the tension leaves their body. Like the parents are very stressed because they want the best for their students. Like I go into the schools and they say the parents aren't engaged, the parents aren't engaged and like you know what just because the parent is not showing up to volunteer for whatever doesn't mean that the parents don't care about their child's education, because they very much care about it. (Staff Interview #2, p.17)

This was further reflected in other engagements with parents:

I find that the parents are a lot more hesitant to have someone come in - often they are very defensive or aggressive - one of the two - so connecting the parents is so much more crucial than in another situation, than in a regular classroom setting, because the trust has to be gained with the parents as well. And some parents are more quick to trust than others depending on what they have gone through. So that is a huge component. I was working with a parent at an agency yesterday on a situation where we have been trying to get in to help a student since February, and it's just been very difficult. (Staff Interview #2, p.10)

Professional Development

The multifaceted Arts Based Project involved 27 teachers in a series of learning activities including workshops and planning sessions, Aboriginal artists visiting classrooms and a multimedia Art Show at the TDSB Aboriginal Education Centre. This project was highly successful. Comments from staff involved in the project include,

we're changing teachers in the art project we have here. I see the difference in them. They don't want to just build a little Iroquois village anymore, [laugh] you know. They want—they want artists coming in, and they want storytellers, and they want to learn, and they want to understand. And we are able to facilitate

that through this project. And that's what becomes meaningful; otherwise, they couldn't—it wouldn't have been available to them.(Staff TC1, p. 11)

I think that there has kind of been, an awakening I guess you could say, or something of that matter. And, there's been an interest that has been sparked. Ah, there's—I feel like they—they've been ignited somehow to pursue more knowledge in and around Aboriginal perspectives, which I think is great. So moving beyond the totem poles and the teepees and various things of that nature as representation of all First Nations, Aboriginal, Inuit and Métis people. (Staff TC1, p. 13)

Comments teachers recorded on their workshop evaluation forms after one of the first Professional Development workshops included,

I am beginning to understand the very important distinction between embedding Aboriginal perspectives/worldview into the curriculum and just “adding” it on. It will significantly change the substance of work with students.

There is so much more to this issue then what has been presented. [It is a] huge issue and I/we need more time for open discussion to help us focus. I am worried that what I thought was respectful is/was in fact inappropriate in some way. I need to rethink what and I how I do some things.

I will inform other staff and rethink past projects.

During interviews conducted after the completion of the project teachers commented on the depth and difficulty of their learning. Many teachers experienced internal conflict as they struggled to understand the differences between and the implications of appropriation and appreciation. They want to recognize the differences between perpetuating stereotypical representations and hearing and learning from the voices of Aboriginal artists and storytellers.

Community Work

A tremendous source of the success of the UAE Pilot Project in the TDSB came from the increasing establishment and presence of community awareness. The Aboriginal Community Advisory Council, a vibrant community organization committed to the transformation of the educational experience for Aboriginal students and families, provides an important support to the UAE PP in its work. In large part, the strength of this coalition is a testament to the networking and community work of Catherine Pawis, Central Coordinating Principal for Aboriginal Education.

Not working in isolation is key; the need to work as a team was emphasized at Talking Circles and in one-on-one interviews, by numerous members of the team. As one team member stated,

I guess what I've learned about myself is I've always felt very passionate about Aboriginal education but to do it together collectively with like awesome people is absolutely wonderful. So, you feel this sense of mobilization and moving forward and impacting and, and making change. (Staff TC#2, p.11)

Working in collaboration allowed the team to learn from each other, access support when confronting resistance and to locate drive in spite of the overwhelming work to be accomplished.

Work with other Aboriginal community services included partnerships with Native Women's Resource Centre, York University, artists, speakers, the Aboriginal Peacekeeping Unit of the Toronto Police, and the Native Canadian Centre. These collaborations allow TDSB staff to gain a sense of the living, vibrant urban aboriginal community & culture that is a part of the Urban Aboriginal experience. These experiences are beginning to have a positive impact on teachers' understanding of the presence of Aboriginal people in the city and of Aboriginal students in their schools and classrooms.

Challenges

Legacy of Colonization and Traumatic Experiences of Schooling

The legacy of negative and traumatic experiences of Aboriginal people with schooling continues to have an impact on Aboriginal students, teachers and staff members. This was evident across generations. The impacts of this legacy are multiple, including:

- Schools are not seen as safe environments for students,
- Schools are not seen as welcoming to Aboriginal communities, and
- Students and parents are reluctant to self-identify as Aboriginal.

Numerous research participants spoke to the impacts of this legacy on their personal relationships to schooling.

One non-Aboriginal staff member described her experience of witnessing the ways in which Aboriginal students and families are positioned as less than, as incapable. She explained it as *“a replication of colonization”* (Teacher Interview #200a, p.5).

Another teacher involved with the project described her reasons for wanting to be a part of the project. When reflecting on her own school experiences she was appalled at the lack of representation or the misrepresentation of Aboriginal people and the sense of alienation she experienced. As a teacher with the TDSB she stated,

And, and also, I feel that I’m part of this project as well because it’s a project that is going to make a difference—is making a difference, and to put Aboriginal education on the map, so to speak in an equitable way because I do find that within the TDSB my personal feelings are, is that, it does still sort of sit on the margins, or outside of the margins. (Teacher Interview #200a, p.5)

Another Aboriginal teacher reflected on the significance of this legacy:

No- I didn't think that I was smart enough - I thought, cause I was told the whole time that Indians don't do this, that this is not what Indians do and I thought I'm just not smart enough. And I had a teacher in grade 13 that said you need to go to university - but at that point because of my family situation I wasn't living at home and I was living in native student housing, and working and on student welfare and just struggling to stay in school and I couldn't even conceive of how to get there financially- I couldn't do it and then I didn't think that I was smart enough either. (Teacher Interview #200b, p.5)

One participating teacher appreciated the opportunities the project would provide her to learn about her history and culture.

My Mom's Aboriginal so I'm very interested because, my Mom was a part of the whole residential school. She was sent off. So, I did not—I wasn't passed down the traditions, the cultures that I guess, normally I would've been. So to get involved, just to kind of work with the group, and also build my own awareness of my culture and traditions, was very meaningful for myself as well to kind of get familiar with, my back— my ancestry as well. I'm very happy to be here and kind of grow with the department as well as personally grow with the department. (Teacher Interview #200a, p.9)

This legacy haunted the work of the pilot project. It shaped teacher and administrative perceptions of Aboriginal students, parents, and teachers. It contributes to the challenge of identifying the number of Aboriginal students within the Board, and also having them feel comfortable enough to self-identify.

Despite the high profile of the Federal Apology for Aboriginal Residential Schools, many teachers, administrators and staff members were unaware of the depth of the negative history with schooling, or of its ongoing impacts on Aboriginal students and communities. This lack of awareness shaped many of the negative interactions and deep-seated resistances to a transformation of the school environment. One research participant summed this tendency up, suggesting that there is *“resistance in schools to seeing schooling as part of the problem”* (UAE PP Staff1, p8).

Teachers and a Depth of Ignorance

During different professional development workshops with teachers the UAEPP staff were aware that teachers seem anxious about including Aboriginal content and perspectives in their classrooms. Staff reported that *‘teachers told us that they ‘don't know how to do this’*. We refer to this as the ‘depth of ignorance’. In part, this ignorance is schooled over generations of general societal inattention to Indigenous issues. It is reinforced in teacher education programs that devote little attention to Indigenous issues, and in the assumption that Aboriginal issues can be encompassed through a general attention to anti-racism, or the dominant multicultural framework. In their interviews teachers told us they included multi-cultural perspectives in their classrooms, that because their classes were so diverse they already addressed ‘diversity’ issues. In important ways multiculturalism and antiracist theory and practice construct a barrier to the inclusion of decolonizing and Aboriginal subject material. Teachers are convinced they have ‘diversity’ covered and do not need to pay “special” attention to Aboriginal issues.

Other teachers and administrators were willing, or even anxious to include Aboriginal perspectives and concerns in their practice, they often reported that they were unsure of how to do so. In the Professional Development work of the UAE Pilot Project, care was taken to provide teachers with some benchmarks and best practices when teaching Aboriginal art, dance and culture. Many teachers expressed ongoing confusion about how to approach similar units in future. In our reflection on the data, it seems that this reflects

the difficulty in providing professional development on appropriate ways to approach difficult material. The development of an internal ‘barometer’ indicating appropriate and respectful representations requires extensive self-reflection and a re-thinking of the relationship between ‘self’ and ‘other’, work which has certainly been started and nurtured through the work of the pilot project, but which will require work and time far in excess of the pilot project.

Colonization has created a kind of ‘communication gap’ between those on different sides of the colonial experience. Overall, it seems that there are a series of ‘missed communications’ – parents, teachers, students and administrators often seem to be speaking past one another. In part, this is due to a failure to recognize the tremendous differences in worldview and perspective.

Students also noted this gap – they noted that for the bulk of education there had been little discussion of Aboriginal people, history, or culture, that Aboriginal people were often represented in problematic and stereotypical ways. The deficit, in terms of prior teaching and engagement on these issues presents a significant challenge to teachers and students. Some students indicated that they had received very little instruction about Aboriginal people, history and culture prior to their involvement with one of the workshops or presentations of the UAE Pilot Project.

I remember when I was little, looking at the report cards we had, and under learning French, it would also show "Native." And I was like, why can't I learn Native? I'm part Native. And so I always wondered why don't we have a Native history course, why don't we have a Native language course? And then when [an issue arose at my school things] started happening, all this stuff with Native people just started exploding at me. And then so I got—we went—I've been to so many things about this. We had talking things in the library. And because of that, now I'm in a program for York University next year, and I'm in a youth group. I don't know, it's crazy. So before I had almost no knowledge, but now it's just coming slowly. So I'm hoping it will keep growing. (Student & Youth TC#1, p.9)

But, we—and then he talked a lot about just about the geography where we came from. And then in History class we just did, just one little paragraph just on Aboriginal people about, like what they ate, you know, what were their communities like, what they slept in. You know, just like the basic stuff like that. And it was just all pretty, in the books, you know, straight teepees, you know. The men went out and hunted and it was just straight. But there was nothing, present-day about Aboriginal people, I thought. It was just more like we're still running around with, you know, buckskin on our ass. You know what I mean? [laughter] That type of thing. That's what I felt like he's telling us. Like, oh, these—how the Aboriginal people were. You know what I mean? I felt like he

was using past tense like we were gone. So that's what I felt. But, yeah. (Student & Youth TC#2, p.4)

This communication gap often resulted in Aboriginal students being represented as the problem:

Yeah. I would label it resistance. But it's sort of partnered with ignorance. And then sometimes it feels like a willful ignorance. Sometimes it feels just like ignorance. So I guess talking to teachers and hearing them say things like... you know, things that make me feel like they're othering the students, that they're seeing them in ways that are stereotypical. At this—ways that they're, I guess othering in the sense that they're really creating a distinction between who they are and who the students are. And then comparing them to other students and saying things like, you know, "I don't have problems with this group. Why do I have problems with this student?" and "I generally can connect with these types of students and why can't I connect with this student? What's going on with the family?" Ah—you know, "I really need to understand what's going on with the family in order to work with the student. (UAE PP int. 1 p. 13)

Coming Out of the Aboriginal Closet

The size of the Toronto District School Board has significantly impacted attempts by the UAE PP team to establish connections with students, families and communities. In particular, finding Aboriginal students, scattered across the board, and often isolated in their schools, was sometimes daunting for UAE PP staff. As one community member noted, this underscores both the importance of the UAE Pilot Project, as well as one of the greatest challenges for the project staff.

Because I knew about the native education program, I knew that if you self-identified that that would be a bonus as well although that was a little nervous cause that was the first time I did that was at University and it was a big decision do I or don't I because I remember when my mom took nursing and she went back as an adult and they complained - and my mom said don't ever self-identify she said because people will say the only reason you are there is because you are an Aboriginal woman and they will never let you ... And they say oh they will just let you in, but you're putting people's lives in danger, or you are sub par - so that was weighing in there and I was thinking you know what it will get me in but it won't keep me in because if I'm doing a bad job they will kick me out. (Staff Interview #2, p.6)

Uncertainty about Stability of Resources

The TDSB is a very large school board, with 580 schools. This makes it difficult for a small, centralized staff to reach the entire Aboriginal students, teachers and communities.

Obstacles to self-identification within this system exacerbate this issue. Change is slow, but the pace of work is frantic, this means that there isn't the time, nor the staffing resources to adequately attend to everyone's needs and requests for support. Initially, with only 12 months to do the work of the project, staff members worried about how widely they could work and achieve change within such a large board, and how meaningfully the relationships they built with students in particular could be maintained. With the project extension, this concern is less evident, although staff members have still expressed concern about a sense of uncertainty.

these are really important relationships. You hope. You hope to establish important relationships, and then you have to honour those by not just walking away without—you know? So that's also a concern of mine, is, like, the students I am working with. What's going to happen to them, and what—you know, what will happen beyond [the pilot project]? (UAE PP Interview #1, p.2)

the momentum is starting to build now, it's also, like, towards what end, right? (UAE PP Interview #1, p)

Hopefully, the more permanent structure of the TDSB AEC will mitigate this concern, providing the students within the board with an ongoing place to find vital support and resources.

Areas for Further Inquiry

In our review of transcripts and field notes over June, July and August 2009, we have been pleased with the scope and depth of data collected to date. We have identified some areas where additional data is required to fully flesh out existing data. These include:

- a) Interviews with students and parents regarding student success (to be initiated in November, following the first round of student assessments and again in March),
- b) Interviews and Talking Circles with community members regarding the successes and challenges of the UAE Pilot Project,
- c) Interviews with teachers about curriculum development and implementation, to assess the success of resources and tools developed by UAE PP Staff,
- d) Completion of a minimum of 20 school audits, from a random sampling of schools across the TDSB, to be conducted over the course of the school year, and
- e) Analysis of demographic data on Aboriginal students within the TDSB and their academic success.

In addition, researchers will continue to maintain close contact with the staff of the UAE Pilot Project, to ensure that we conduct participant observation at relevant events. We will continue to schedule regular interviews and Talking Circles with UAE Pilot Project staff. Additionally, we will continue to work in collaboration with Andrea Johnston Inc to ensure that she is provided with the necessary data to complete the provincial review.

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