Bridging the Education Gap for Indigenous Students
with Student-Teacher Relationship

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Abstract

This thesis explores the question of how we can keep our Indigenous students connected and engaged at school through strong teacher-student relationship. I have delved into the most recent and relevant qualitative research into what works to keep these students engaged and successful in school. The research reviewed asks Indigenous students, their families, and their teachers what teacher qualities and styles of teacher-student relationships keep and kept them wanting to be in school. I have identified the common themes and made them easily accessible to the Canadian K-12 educator in my thesis.

As an elementary school teacher, for the past two school years I have taken my own teaching style and enhanced it with a focus on these particular teacher traits and relational qualities, and have found that indeed, my Indigenous students have become increasingly invested in their schooling experience. My own teaching experiences in this area, combined with an in-depth review of the relevant literature, serve to fuel my conclusions around how to ensure that our Indigenous students feel valued and engaged at school. It is hoped that Canadian teachers will work to adopt these simple practices and ways of being with their students so that we can markedly increase the school success of our Indigenous learners.
Acknowledgments

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Dedication

In loving memory of my mother, Kitty May:

who was always so proud of me as both a teacher and a human being;

and my grandmother, Mary Beynon:

who was the reason I became a teacher in the first place.
Bridging the Gap

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Chapter One

Introduction

Nine years ago, I worked for a short time at an elementary school in Pitt Meadows, British Columbia, that was attended by a population of Aboriginal children who were bussed in from the local Katzie reserve. It was a Kindergarten to Grade seven school, and I taught Grade two/three and Grade one, each one day a week here.

It struck me that these Indigenous children stood apart from the rest of the school population, which was mainly Caucasian, in two notable ways. First, these students had a very particular way of ‘being;’ they were much less inclined to move or work quickly than the general school population when it was time to work on a task or participate in physical activity. In a sense, they seemed to be on their own time frame and did not share the same ideas of what we, as teachers, deemed important. Their response speed and work pace were noticeably slower than the majority of their classmates, and their reading, writing, and math progress also lagged behind many of their peers. The curriculum seemed to be meaningless to these learners; they were almost completely disengaged from what we were teaching. What and how we were teaching appeared to have little or nothing to do with what was important to them.
Second, this group of students appeared very insular. I do not mean this in a negative sense. When I look up the definition, I find such terms as “narrow-minded” and “ignorant” as synonyms, which are not at all the description or intended meaning of what I am describing. Instead, I use this word in the most respectful way. These children seemed insular in the sense of being tightly bound to each other; being concerned about and strongly connected to each other, with little or no visible ties or connection to their teachers or the school community at large. For these children, it seemed to me, their relationships amongst each other were of prime importance, not their school work and their classroom communities, as it was for many of their non-Aboriginal peers.

It appeared there was a community within a community at this school, but not in a supportive, inter-connected way. I struggled with feelings of discomfort around how disconnected these children seemed to be from the rest of the school, but it was early on in my teaching career and I didn’t feel confident enough to engage in conversation with my colleagues about how I felt. It seemed to be ‘normal’ here; but, because I didn’t hear any concerns being raised, I kept quiet. The sense I had of these children being almost completely disengaged from the communities of the classrooms and from the learning troubled me for years after I’d completed my contract there and moved on.

In the past three years I’ve again had the opportunity to work with Indigenous learners, and I’ve seen similar patterns. At one school, a small group of familial connected students also kept to themselves at school, and seemed fairly disconnected from the curriculum, just as if it held no meaning for them. These children also seemed to process and responded in a slower and much quieter way than their non-Aboriginal peers, and they struggled both academically and
socially. I also saw Aboriginal children at this school who were as connected to their teachers and as engaged in the learning as many of their peers. Although many of them did struggle academically, it was not the extreme situation I’d seen at the previous school discussed, because there was not a whole community of children coming to school that lived and played together.

However, the mere fact that the situation repeated itself, albeit in a microcosm, piqued my interest and again troubled me. I began to wonder, what are we not doing for these children? Why do they keep themselves so separate from the rest of the school community, and why does what and how we teach seem to be so pointless for and to them? It was around this time that I started my Restorative Justice Certificate Program at Simon Fraser University, and I began to learn about the history of the Indigenous people of Canada, and about some of their beliefs, values, and traditional ways of teaching and learning. With my eyes opened to some of the many barriers to education these children were encountering, I began to work very hard to connect with and academically support and challenge the child in my class that was part of the above-mentioned group.

Last school year I had five Aboriginal students in my class. Four struggled academically, three significantly so; two showed signs of being disconnected from the curriculum, and two worked at a much slower pace than the majority of the class. This school year I have two Aboriginal students; one who struggles both academically and emotionally, and another who show severe signs of disconnection. As a teacher, I cannot but care about these children. Furthermore, I now have a mission that I feel truly matters; I hope to build strong student-teacher relationships with, and improve academic success for, my Indigenous students.
Justification for the Study

Over the years I’ve come to see the positive effects of strong student-teacher relationships on my students’ level of engagement, and this has become an area of passionate focus for me. I completed the Restorative Justice Certificate Program through Simon Fraser University in 2016, and I have been keenly interested in incorporating Aboriginal content and understandings into the classroom with our new Social Studies curriculum since that time. My focus is now centered on the area of student-teacher connection and how this connection can improve academic outcomes for Indigenous children in Canada.

As research indicates, when students feel connected to and important to their teachers, they are more likely to engage in learning (Gallagher, 2013). Research also suggests that children from lower socio-economic status are overall less positively connected to their teachers, which leads to poorer school outcomes, and often to a life of reduced socio-economic expectation (Hughes and Kwok, 2007). Thus, the cycle continues. Coupled with this cycle is the fact that parents’ educational attainment and that of their children are strongly linked: parents who dropped out of high school are more likely to have children who drop out (Statistics Canada, 2009).

While graduation rates are slowly rising for Aboriginal students in Canada, they are still much lower than the overall graduation rate; Aboriginal students are graduating at a rate 15 percentage points lower than the general population. According to Statistics Canada, simply being of Aboriginal origin doubles the likelihood of dropping out of high school (2009). Because high school graduation is a measure of educational attainment and socio-economic status, and
educational attainment and income are linked positively to well-being, it is imperative that we improve academic success for our Aboriginal students.

**Background**

Seeing Aboriginal students struggle in school is, sadly, nothing new. Ten years ago, the B.C. government committed to closing the education gap between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students because of the huge disparity in education outcome: at that time, more than 80% of non-Aboriginal students were graduating from high school, but less than 50% of Aboriginal students were doing the same. Much still needs to be learned so educators can create the conditions in which Aboriginal learners will thrive.

Reasons proposed for why Aboriginal students struggle academically are plentiful. Many scholars who study the effects of colonialism suggest that the debasement of Indigenous peoples and the ongoing legacy of intergenerational trauma within Indigenous communities are the primary reasons behind these educational challenges (Battiste, 2000a, 2000b; Duran, 2006; Schissel & Wotherspoon, 2002; Tuhiwai Smith, 2012, in Pratt & Danyluk, 2017). Additionally, many contend that Indigenous students struggle to engage in learning conditions based on an unfamiliar worldview and an education system that is based on European ways of thinking. (Battiste, 2000a, 2000b; Association of Canadian Deans of Education, 2010; Dei, 2002; Wiggins, Follo, & Eberly, 2007; Phillips & Whatman, 2007, in in Pratt & Danyluk, 2017).

It has also been suggested that Aboriginal parents and families, still reeling from the intergenerational effects of being stripped of their families, language, and culture, maintain a sense of distrust about the purpose of public schooling and continue to fear an agenda of
assimilation, making school an uncomfortable necessity for many children and their families (Whitley, 2014). Other explanations for this education inequality include a ‘poor fit’ between the conditions of the formal mainstream education system, including types of assessments, curriculum, and pedagogies, and the learning styles and values of Aboriginal students and their families (Whitley, 2014).

Two issues very clearly present themselves. First, the educational disparity between Aboriginal students and non-Aboriginal students in Canada is real and needs to be addressed. Second, Aboriginal learners have unique needs that must be thoughtfully incorporated into Canadian educators’ classroom environments and pedagogy.

When asking what educators could do to improve Aboriginal students’ academic success, the most obvious place to look is to the experts themselves: students, their families, and their communities. In *Our Words, Our Ways* (2005), First Nations, Inuit, and Métis elders in Alberta describe relationship as being the backbone for all teaching. They state, “with Aboriginal students this is a vital step that connects to culture, where all learning is based, first of all, on relationship” (p. 30). There is much agreement on this subject, and within relationship the element of teacher expectations has a significant impact on Aboriginal student achievement. When Aboriginal students in grades four to eight were asked what would help remove educational barriers, they identified such common themes as relevant and meaningful curriculum, having choice in their learning, a focus on student strengths, and having explicit links made to future education and careers (Whitley, 2014).
Another identified factor that plays an important role in the academic success of these students is to tailor learning experiences around the learning needs and styles of many Aboriginal students. These include a holistic education (learning from whole to part); the use of a variety of visual organizers and hands-on manipulatives; a reflective mode of learning (time to complete tasks and answer questions); and working on collaborative tasks (group and pair work) (Toulouse, 2008).

Over the last two years, specifically since learning about Aboriginal people’s history with Canada and observing the continuing effects of post-colonialism on these students’ lives, I have come to see reconciliation as every Canadian’s responsibility. I believe educators can have a profoundly positive impact in this area and can play a part in reconciliation in two ways. First, we must develop and maintain strong and educationally motivating relationships with our Aboriginal students to increase both their sense of teacher connection and their engagement in learning. Second, we must authentically incorporate Aboriginal content, history, and beliefs in our classroom communities and teaching in a heartfelt way, respectful way, to ensure relevance of curriculum for our Aboriginal students and compassionate learning for our non-Aboriginal students. I hope that by being mindful of these two actions, we can make a positive difference in the academic success of our Aboriginal students, and therefore their present and future well-being.

**Research Question**

How can strong student-teacher relationships improve academic outcomes for Aboriginal elementary and secondary students in Canada?
Definitions of Key Terms

Aboriginal: Including First Nations, Inuit, and Métis people of Canada

Indigenous: First inhabitants of Canada, including First Nations, Inuit, and Métis.

First Peoples: First inhabitants of Canada, including First Nations, Inuit, and Métis.

In this paper I use the terms ‘Aboriginal,’ ‘Indigenous,’ and First Peoples interchangeably. In this paper, I also use the terms ‘academic success’ and ‘academic outcomes’ interchangeably, and I’ve assumed throughout that learning engagement is implicitly woven into the meeting of grade level expectations.

Brief Overview of the Process

In my study I will review scholarly articles regarding the question of how strong teacher-student connections can help improve academic success for elementary and secondary Aboriginal students in Canada. Elementary school success is defined as ‘meeting expectations’ in reading, writing, and numeracy, and secondary school success is defined as graduating from high school. I will then be taking the information I have gathered and synthesizing it into a coherent whole of the ‘why’ and the ‘how’ in my literature review so Canadian educators might feel buoyed and strengthened to improve Aboriginal academic outcomes. I engage this area of study so that we as Canadian educators might work together to bridge the education gap with strong relationships and improve both the present and future lives of our Indigenous students.
Chapter Two: Literature Review

Introduction

It has long been known that Canadian Aboriginal students struggle with academic success in our public schools. They are more likely than any other group to drop out of school, and they are more likely to experience such related negative emotional and physical health consequences as increased rates of suicides and substance abuse (Grover, 2002; as cited in Stelmach, Kovach, & Steeves, 2017).

Reasons for this set of dis-eases for Canadian Aboriginal students abound and have been written about extensively (Brown Schafers, 2014; Preston, Green, Martin, Claypool, & Rowluck, 2015; Hogue, 2016; Whitley, 2014). Two main reasons I’ve found for this disturbing trend of lack of school success include the continuing effects of colonization, with it’s inherent undercurrent of racism, and the legacy of trauma from residential schools, which together have resulted in the following: Aboriginal children are critically over-represented in Ministry care; many of their families live in poverty and deal with issues of alcoholism, drug addiction, and abuse; and Aboriginal high school completion rates are at least 15 percent below that of Canadian non-Aboriginal youth (Statistics Canada, 2015). The Canadian Teachers Federation recognizes the crucial role of education in making positive change for Indigenous peoples. “Education has been identified as being critical in improving the lives of Indigenous peoples and addressing long-standing inequities.” (Canadian Teachers Federation, 2018).
I have chosen, for the purposes of this paper, to define success as being engaged in learning throughout schooling to the end of graduating from high school. I define success this way for two reasons: (a) the purpose of this paper is to focus on how the student-teacher relationship can improve the chances of academic success for Aboriginal students and (b) the answer I’ve uncovered for what success means for these students is the following:

Overall, Aboriginal people want two basic things from the education system. They want schools to help children, youth and adults learn the skills they need to participate fully in the economy. And they want schools to help children and youth develop as citizens of Aboriginal nations—with the knowledge of their histories, languages and traditions necessary for cultural continuity (Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples 1996a; as cited in Our Words, Our Ways, 2005, p. 19).

The question is, how do we keep Aboriginal students in school so they can successfully learn?

When reviewing the literature about roadblocks to academic success, several key themes emerge as factors critical to Aboriginal student achievement. Student-teacher relationships, teaching relevant and context-based curriculum, instilling a sense of belonging, and designing hands-on learning experiences that incorporate Aboriginal Ways of Knowing and Learning have been repeatedly identified as conduits to Aboriginal students becoming and staying engaged in school (Castellon, 2017; Burym, 2016; Goulet, 2005; Hogue, 2016; MacIver, 2012; & Stelmach,
et al., 2017). Although these areas all require and indeed deserve further investigation, my literature review focuses on the aspect of strong student-teacher relationships and how these relationships can help our Aboriginal students thrive in school. As a teacher and researcher, this is the path along which my heart leads me.

It is my belief that Canadian educators are responsible for playing an integral part in reconciliation by building bridges to success for our Aboriginal students. Teachers can achieve this goal by forging bonds that will motivate and encourage these students to become and remain engaged in their learning. Often the issue of Aboriginal student achievement is viewed from a deficit-based approach, asking the question, what is going wrong?

My paper will take a different path: it will follow the lead of Bazylak (2003) and focus on positive factors for school success, with a “solution-based philosophy that drives educational transformation” (p. 135). I will take a strengths-based approach and look at the question: “What is going right?” In choosing this more positive approach, I will weave in voices from Aboriginal students and their teachers, and to a small degree their principals, to answer at least part of this crucial question. The voices of the parents of Aboriginal students will not be explored in the limited scope of this literature review, but I whole-heartedly acknowledge that these voices need to be heard.

This literature review examines: (a) why strong student-teacher relationships are so important to Aboriginal student success; (b) the characteristics that define these relationships; (c) what these relationships can look like and how they can be developed; and (d) the characteristics of teachers who build strong relationships with their Aboriginal students.
Theme One: Why is it so important to develop strong relationships?

The correlation between positive student-teacher relationships and student learning has been well-documented (Berryman, Carr-Stewart, Kovach, Laliberté, Meyer & Steeves, 2014; Hamre & Piante, 2001; Hughes & Kwok, 2007; Goulet, 2005; MacIver, 2012; Preston et al., 2015; Stelmach et al., 2017; Toulouse, 2008; Whitley, 2014). The development of these relationships has a monumental impact on student engagement and achievement and is even more important when we hold in mind the current dismal state of Aboriginal high school completion in Canada. Aboriginal students who feel valued and respected and whose academic challenges are met are more likely to experience high levels of school satisfaction, be more academically engaged, and are more likely to exhibit positive attitudes and values at school (Burym, 2016).

Students who enjoy close and positive relationships with their teachers are more engaged: they work harder in the classroom, persevere when things are difficult, accept their teacher’s direction and feedback, manage stress more easily, and listen more carefully to their teachers (Birch & Ladd, 1997, 1998; Battistich et al., 1997; Marks, 2000; Skinner & Belmont, 1993; Ladd et al., 1999; as cited in Hughes & Kwok, 2007). This evidence is supported by teachers, students, and observers. If there is any doubt regarding the importance of a supportive relationship between student and teacher, one must only look at evidence found by Hamre and Piante (2001), who found that the quality of teacher-student relationships in Kindergarten continued to have effects on student learning up to eight years later.
The importance of relationship is well understood by Alberta First Nation, Métis, and Inuit Elders, and is therefore one of the five guiding principles of the *Our Words, Our Ways* (2005) document. *Our Words, Our Ways* (2005) is a resource that offers educators information about Aboriginal cultures and perspectives, practical ideas, and strategies that will help teachers meet the needs and recognize the gifts of Aboriginal students. The third guiding principle is, “Student/teacher relationship is the foundation of that student’s success in the classroom” (p. v) This authentic document beautifully and simply illustrates how school should look for all learners.

Although the need to establish a relationship may seem self-evident, with Aboriginal students this is a vital step that connects to culture, where all learning is based, first of all, on relationship. Offering kindness, trust and a positive awareness of family and culture sets the stage for students to feel welcome and to want to attend school every day. (*Our Words, Our Ways, 2005, p. 30*)

Powerful indicators of success for students that result from strong relationships with dedicated and inspirational teachers include improved self-concept, increased motivation to learn, an “inner hope or fire”, increased attendance rates, increased feelings of security and attachment, being committed, driven and harbouring post-secondary aspirations, and an increased desire to improve society (Burym, 2016; Goulet, 2005; Preston & Claypool, 2013, p. 271; Stelmach et al., 2017). The grounding power of relationship for Aboriginal students is clearly stated as one of the five tenets of what constitutes a “welcoming environment” for Indigenous students; “Meaningful relationships between Indigenous students and their teachers
are based in authenticity and real-life conversations.” (Walker, Mishenene & Watt, 2012-2013, p. 3; as cited in Toulouse, 2013, p. 11). The imperativeness for Canadian educators to strengthen their bonds with Aboriginal students is vividly apparent.

Advocates for the gravity of positive student-teacher relationships, students and teachers alike, claim these relational bonds must be forged before academics can be focused on, so that teachers get to know their students’ strengths, interests, learning challenges, and the context of their lives (Berryman et al., 2014). By doing so, teachers can then design appropriate curriculum and meet student learning needs (Goulet, 2005; Oskineegish, 2015). Preston et al. (2015) further add that teachers must get to know the talents of each of their Aboriginal students so they can also celebrate the successes of each, thereby increasing student motivation. They must “unlock the potential of each learner, by coming to know them as individual learners within their cultural context” (Our Words, Our Ways, 2005, p. 29). Stelmach et al. (2017) heard similar sentiments from high school Aboriginal youth, where students enjoyed learning from teachers who, they felt, invested extra attention in their learning.

Two comments from Stelmach et al.’s (2017) work illustrate this point clearly. “I am terrible with math, but [Teacher] could figure out ten different ways to explain a problem… she was creative enough to think of something for every student to kind of figure out what she was teaching was really awesome.” (p. 9) “I loved going to his classroom because he would make sure that if I didn’t know what I was doing that he would take the time and teach me.” (p. 9). As advised by Stelmach et al., good teaching is not so much about curricular content as it is about intentionally reaching every student. Preston and Claypool (2013) aptly illustrate the foundational importance of the teacher-student relationship as setting the stage for engaged
learning to take place; “Immersing students in a nurturing, accepting, safe environment was the catalyst that unleashed students’ motivation to learn” (p. 271).

The above evidence is further supported by Whitley’s findings (2014). Teachers of Albertan Aboriginal students in grade four to eight thought, when students' academic needs were not being met or they were not getting the help they needed, students felt “isolated” and disconnected from school (p. 169). Schoenlein (2004) discovered the same sentiments in students themselves. “Almost to a person, dropouts complain that they could not get or were too embarrassed to ask for the academic help they needed and got ‘lost in the crowd’ (as cited in MacIver, 2012, p.17). Clearly, by spending time getting to know their students before jumping into curriculum, educators can create spaces that invite student successes throughout the school year; in effect, they can help engage students in learning and sustain that engagement.

With the exception of students who did not have supportive relationships with their teachers, all students in the literature I reviewed identified positive connections with teachers as being either the most, or one of the most, important aspects of their educational success (Goulet, 2005; MacIver, 2012; Bazylak, 2003; Stelmach et al., 2017). In fact, evidence indicates that children most at risk for school failure and eventual drop-out (because of risk factors associated with low socioeconomic status and being of a minority) are those who generally experience less supportive relationships with their teachers, but who are most affected by the quality of their connections with teachers (Hughes and Kwok, 2007).

The importance of building strong, positive connections with Aboriginal students is overwhelmingly clear: If we are to keep these students in school and enjoying their schooling
experience, it is our responsibility to connect with them in ways that encourage and support. This evidence provides educators compelling reasons to put their energies into establishing strong and nourishing rapports with their Aboriginal students.

**Theme Two: What characterizes supportive teacher-student relationships?**

The overarching principles that emerged from the research as creating the foundation for such positive relationships were mutual respect, honesty, safety, feeling valued and recognized, mutual trust, and open communication (Whitley, 2014; MacIver, 2012; Oskineegish, 2015; Bazylak, 2003; Stelmach et al., 2017). Safety is an important factor to recognize in such relationships, according to the literature. Many Aboriginal students highlighted safety as a positive influence on their schooling, because some students have been abused and many live in emotionally charged households, where basic needs for emotional and or physical health are not being met (MacIver, 2012; Stelmach et al., 2017) One student commented on the importance of feeling well-taken care of. “Lunch would be provided here and I just felt real safe here” (Berryman et al., 2005, p. 77).

Respect is a fundamental part of any supportive relationship. In Ojibwe, respect means that people are sacred and have a place in the world. As Toulouse (2008) asserts, “This [respect] is how we need to foster and support our Aboriginal students” (p. 1). Students are more likely to trust teachers who they feel care about them and their learning, which contributes to positive interactions with teachers and beneficial feelings about being at school (Stelmach et al., 2017). Together, mutual respect and trust create a strong sense of equality in relationships, which is another fundamental characteristic of good teacher-student relationships (Goulet, 2005).
Stelmach et al. heard from Aboriginal teens that “feeling like an equal with teachers” is important (p. 8). One student shared, “I love when a teacher isn’t so much of an authority figure, but they come down on your level.” (Stelmach et al., p. 8)

This notion of equality is validated by Makosis (2000; as cited in Fisher & Campbell, 2002), who suggests that to be successful in teaching Aboriginal youth educators must understand Aboriginal culture. She suggests that Aboriginals view leadership as relational as opposed to individualistic, and teachers would do well to open their minds to more culturally relevant ways of teaching and leading. She writes,

The concept of relational leadership requires a paradigm shift. No longer is the top down hierarchy recognized as effective, as it dehumanizes people. In fact, relational leadership implies that anyone can lead, whether it be the student, teacher or administrator. (Makokis, 2000, p.80; as cited in Fisher & Campbell, 2002)

According to Makokis (2000), relational leadership is based upon the following characteristics: collaboration, caring, courage, intuition and vision. Leaders who practice these five attributes, she says, embrace the Natural Laws of the Creator. “In the Native community the establishment and maintenance of relationships is key” (p. 88). Developing relationships with students that are defined by mutual respect and equality can set the groundwork for student motivation and engagement. When asked what factors had helped keep recently-graduated young Aboriginal women in school, they described classroom cultures of equality, where discipline was provided through non-authoritative means, such as building community and
solving problems through the use talking circles and open discussion, as mitigating factors on their school experience (Castellon, 2017; Maclver, 2012). Successful teachers of young Aboriginal students also describe the importance of building classroom cultures where discipline was non-confrontational, such as explaining why a particular action is unsafe, rather than just telling a student to stop doing something (Oskineegish, 2015).

The relational characteristics discussed above define the qualities of healthy relationships, which provided further evidence that we are on the right track (Promoting Relationships and Eliminating Violence Network, 2018). These supportive relationships are characterised by the guiding principles of mutual respect, honesty, compassion, and both physical and emotional safety.

**Theme Three: What Can These Relationships Look Like, and How to Develop Them?**

What can, or do, strong student teacher relationships look like, and where and when do these come about? There is much agreement in the literature to answer these questions.

Strong and supportive student-teacher relationships take time and consistency to develop (Bazylak, 2003), and they blossom in welcoming spaces teachers and administrators together create (Stockdale, Parsons, & Beauchamp, 2013; Whitley, 2014). These relationships are forged in myriad ways: by teachers spending time tutoring struggling students, either individually or in small groups, at recess or lunch, after school, or during their prep blocks (Bazylak, 2003; Preston et al., 2015). They happen while teachers lead after school fine arts or sports activities for students (Berryman et al, 2014; Goulet, 2005; Preston et al., 2015). Trust deepens when students feel they are important to their teachers, and relationships are strengthened when students can
speak openly about personal difficulties and receive deep listening and positive role-modelling in return (Bazylak, 2003; Berryman et al, 2014; Stelmach et al., 2017). Bazylak (2003) eloquently describes the counsellor-like role some teachers play as described by female Aboriginal high school students, in that “it was necessary to heal the heart before academics could be a priority” (p. 147). Berryman et al. (2014) heard repeatedly from students that a powerful factor for success was teachers being interested in students’ lives and seeking to find out what was behind negative student behaviours, as the following quotes describing caring teachers illustrate:

“They help you all the time, and they talk to you when you’re down” (S2).
“You can feel free to say what you want to say” (S3).
“They kind of see when you’re upset” (S4).
“…when we are skipping class, they are not so much like, “Get to class! Get to class!” They are like, “What’s going on? How was your weekend? How is home life?...When there are terrible things going on in my life, I talk to [teacher]” (S5).

“If you look down, she will ask you what’s wrong, and you could always cry on her shoulders.” (S6, p. 82)

It is clear that Indigenous students benefit from compassion and caring in their relationships with their teachers, and this lesson is an incredibly valuable one for educators: lead with the heart, and the brain will follow.
Strong relationships are established when teachers structure time and space in their classrooms for one-on-one interactions with their students, visiting with each throughout the day (Goulet, 2005). They happen when teachers use Aboriginal structures, such as talking circles, to promote mutually respectful dialogue and develop problem solving skills, where teachers and students make decisions together (Richard, 2016). Stockdale et al. (2013) discuss the power of honouring traditional Aboriginal values by using talking circles and restorative justice practices, rather than traditional methods of discipline, to make space for strong relationship building within the school context. The use of talking circles is an authentic way of building relational leadership and developing feelings of equality between teacher and student, and they are defined by some Aboriginal youth as an important practice keeping them in the classroom.

These positive connections flourish when teachers use the consistency of structure and class routines to create a sense of community in the class room so students feel emotionally and physically safe (Burym, 2016). Some teachers and Indigenous students find that being appropriately physically close can strengthen the bond between teacher and student. With students, up to and including grade six it was observed that touching students gently on the head, arm, and shoulder, and hugging and holding hands were indicative of supportive and close student-teacher relationships, as was using nicknames for students (Goulet, 2005; Oskineegish, 2015). Physically getting down to a child or a teen’s level while talking or working together was also often observed as a sign of a positive relationship (MacIver, 2012; Oskineegish, 2015).

Creating spaces and classrooms that are supportive, nurturing, and caring are vital to student learning. As one Saskatchewan teen put it, schools and classes should feel “like a family. That’s, I think, how a school should feel.” (Stelmach et al., 2017, p. 8). Burym (2016) describes
the necessity of building a “climate of trust so students will want to learn what the teacher has to share with them” (p. 24). Preston and Claypool (2013) describe the inherent power of such relationships, where “teachers gave tirelessly of their time and helped to instill a sense of hope and personal pride in their students.” (p. 270).

These positive relationships are defined by another important trait; flexibility. Many students identified flexibility within the classroom as being tied directly to their school success (Stelmach et al., 2017). Extended due dates when needed, as well as honouring and welcoming varied learning styles and ways of showing learning, are all examples of flexibility discussed in the literature. Being flexible is tied to staying positive; students feel supported by teachers who are flexible with assignment due dates and who stay calm and maintain an emotionally safe environment when unexpected situations arise (Bazylak, 2003; Oskineegish, 2015).

Burym (2016) and MacIver (2012) agree that teacher professionalism is paramount in any student-teacher relationship, meaning that while being open and honest with students during conversation and joking, teachers must keep an appropriate level of disclosure themselves, always maintaining a healthy boundary. Teachers are there to provide support for students, not themselves. Finally, these relationships must foster a positive work ethic in students, encourage their academic success, and be grounded in high expectations of Aboriginal students (Burym, 2016; Stelmach et al, 2017; Toulouse, 2008). Separate focus group discussions with teachers and Albertan and Saskatchewan elementary and high school Aboriginal students found that maintaining high expectations was important to both groups: and both students and teachers stated that, if educators harboured low expectations of their Aboriginal students, they needed to spend time reflecting on and challenging their negative biases and assumptions about the
academic capabilities of said learners (Stelmach et al., 2017; Whitley, 2014). Berryman et al. (2014) head similar sentiments from Aboriginal high school students, who felt that teachers often misjudged their academic abilities, based on their race, as described in the following excerpt:

Negative stereotyping and/or racism was sometimes associated with teachers’ assumptions about Indigenous students’ abilities. Some students described experiences with teachers that made these students feel academically inferior:

“They acted like we were slower and we didn’t understand things, and they explained it slower. And sometimes they put us in a different class. Automatically we were assigned to talk to the counsellor, and to do work with the counsellor...They didn’t test us.” (p. 78)

This point is important to consider, as disturbingly, evidence has shown teachers have lower expectations of students from minority backgrounds, and most teachers in Canadian schools are Caucasian, not Aboriginal (Kesner, 2000; Pigott & Cowen, 2000; as cited in Stelmach et al., 2017).

It is evident that both students themselves and their teachers know what kinds of teacher-student relationships they need to experience success in school. This fact leads me to the question, why isn’t such success happening more often? Of course, the teacher participants in these studies might not be indicative of the general population of Canadian teachers and might be more self-reflective in terms of how they can best serve Aboriginal students. The above examples and anecdotes indicate the endless opportunities that are open to Canadian teachers for
building and nurturing strong and positive connections with their Aboriginal students, as well as demonstrating the value of these relationships.

**Theme Four: Characteristics of Teachers Who Build These Relationships**

Stelmach et al. (2017) conducted focused discussion groups with Saskatchewan Aboriginal high school students. They asked what instructional practice helped and hindered high school students’ learning. Unequivocally, these teens spoke about their teachers as being the central help, or hindrance, to their school success.

Three “relational capabilities” of effective teachers and how these impacted student learning emerged in these discussions (Stelmach et al., 2017, p. 3). The first is teacher empathetic responsiveness, which builds student-teacher connection; the second is teacher disposition, which positively influences or thwarts relationship with students; and the third is teacher consideration of student lives, including Indigenous sensitivities, which helps students feel accepted and understood. The common threads running through these themes are those of teachers caring about their students as people and wanting to help them succeed in school. It is not surprising that these themes emerge time and again, because it is human nature to want to be cared about and to feel valued.

The characteristics of teachers who build strong relationships with their Aboriginal students are stated clearly in the voices of the students and their teachers in the literature. Being genuinely caring, having an ‘open heart’ and mind, being patient and flexible, being a good listener, being genuine and therefore credible, and having a sense of humour are the teacher traits deemed most essential by students and teachers alike (Bazylak, 2003; Berryman et al.,
2014; Goulet, 2005, p. 95; Oskineegish, 2015; Stelmach et al., 2017). Burym (2016) agrees that being “open and genuine in dialogue” were key traits of these teachers (p. 166). Toulouse (2008) discusses the finding that Aboriginal students’ school success is strongly impacted by their self-esteem, which is directly affected by how their teachers relate to them. She illustrates respect as being one of the seven living principles of the Ojibwe people, and one that is central to the success of Aboriginal students. As described by Toulouse (2008), under the umbrella of respect fall teacher criteria for Aboriginal students succeeding in school: educators who truly care about their students, who have the highest ‘regard for their learning’, and who have high expectations of their potential (p.1).

Other important qualities of teachers who build strong relationships with their students include responding to students in a timely manner, anticipating student needs and emotions, providing frequent and honest feedback to students, “reaching every student” by getting to know their learning styles so they can be taught and assessed accordingly, and focusing on what learners can do, instead of what they cannot (Goulet, 2005; Hamre & Pianta, 2001; Stelmach et al., 2017, p. 9; Our Words, Our Ways, 2005).

Positive teacher attributes are further recounted in MacIver (2012) when Aboriginal students speak of teachers who positively affected their school success by being “humorous, fun-loving, who listen and respond, and maintain open communication channels” (p. 158-159). Humour emerged as important in two ways. One, humour was a tool to “connect, engage, motivate, and keep students interested” (Bazylak, 2003, p. 147). Two, when teachers laughed at themselves when they make mistakes they showed that mistakes were human and they could laugh at “life’s ups and downs” when things went wrong, and they knew “how to take a joke”
Another critical teacher trait that emerged was that of acting and speaking in positive ways towards their students – ways that made them feel accepted and supported in their struggles (Bazylak, 2003; Oskineegish, 2015). One student, who had recently had a baby and was struggling to keep up in school, received extra tutoring from her teacher. She displayed her relief when his positiveness and caring heart, instead of frustration, were evident when she stated, “and he would not get mad at me” when helping her with her school work (Bazylak, 2003, p. 145.)

According to Saskatchewan Aboriginal youth, teachers must show they are interested in their students and their success. Teachers can listen to how stress, jobs, and family issues can impact student lives, and also be willing to find ways to help their students succeed. These endeavors kept Indigenous youth motivated to stay in school because they felt supported and inspired. As asserted by Stelmach et al. (2017), “when compassion was balanced with high expectations, students felt like they mattered. Being told to get to class or to be serious was interpreted as teachers’ caring about these students getting a ‘way better education’” (p. 9). It is obvious that students know exactly what they need from their teachers to succeed in school.

These youths also defined teacher self-reflection as an integral component to successfully building relationships with and teaching them. This quality was termed “teaching responsibility” by Stelmach et al. (2017, p. 15). It was described as the responsibility teachers have for critically reflecting on their practice and how their own investment and enjoyment in the job, or lack
thereof, impacts their students. Examples given by students included teachers who “get frustrated in trying to teach you when they shouldn’t…when we don’t understand, they get mad;” teachers who “did not bother to challenge students and just basically hand[ed] out anything;” and, teachers’ negative moods setting off student moods, as in this case, “They say, ‘Leave your problems at the door.’ But how are we supposed to do that when [they] are yelling?” (Stelmach et al., 2017, p. 10) Teachers who didn’t demonstrate to students that they were emotionally invested in teaching were perceived as untrustworthy, and students thought they should no longer be teaching.

I strongly believe our moral and ethical responsibility is to listen to what these youths are saying. They are telling us, in no uncertain terms, what they need from their teachers to be academically successful. We would be wise to listen.

Summary

Four key themes emerged from the literature. The first theme, and arguably the most important, answers the question of why student teacher connections are so necessary. The answer is simple: Aboriginal students who develop positive connections with their teachers and who feel their academic needs are being met enjoy school more, become and stay engaged in learning, and are much more likely to graduate from high school. These youths are also more likely to go on to post-secondary education and earn more money, and therefore gain a higher socio-economic status and sense of self-worth, directly and positively affecting their physical, psychological, and emotional well-being.
The second key theme deals with the characteristics of strong teacher-student relationships. These supportive relationships are characterised by the guiding principles of mutual respect, honesty, compassion, physical and emotional safety, and are grounded in high expectations of learners, marked by flexibility for due dates and learning styles.

The third key theme deals with what these strong relationships can look like and how they can be built. These relationships take time and consistency to build. They can develop during times when teachers lead after-school activities and spend time visiting or joking with students, while they help struggling students understand difficult concepts or get them caught up on work. They can include physical closeness and some affection, in particular, with primary and elementary school age students. They flourish when students feel encouraged, accepted, and supported, culturally, academically, and emotionally.

The fourth key theme details the most common traits of teachers who build relationships that matter with their Aboriginal students. These teachers are genuine and open while maintaining an appropriate level of privacy about their own lives. They make friendly jokes and laugh at themselves when they make mistakes. These teachers hold high expectations for their students and support them by celebrating student successes. They act as role models for positive behaviours, and relate to their students in non-confrontive, equalitarian ways. They create welcoming classes and spaces for their students, and they use their knowledge of student strengths, interests, and challenges to design relevant and interesting curriculum. They value and honour all types of learning and learners. These are the teachers who help their Aboriginal students succeed.
Conclusion

I have chosen, for the purposes of this paper, to define success as being engaged in learning throughout schooling to the end of graduating from high school. I define success this way for two reasons: (a) the purpose of this paper is to focus on how the student-teacher relationship can improve the chances of academic success for Aboriginal students and (b) the answer I’ve uncovered for what success means for these students is the following:

Overall, Aboriginal people want two basic things from the education system. They want schools to help children, youth and adults learn the skills they need to participate fully in the economy. And they want schools to help children and youth develop as citizens of Aboriginal nations—with the knowledge of their histories, languages and traditions necessary for cultural continuity (Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples 1996a; as cited in Our Words, Our Ways, 2005, p. 19).

Bazylak’s (2003) qualitative study, which examined the factors for success of high school completion for five Aboriginal female students, was the earliest study I could find that asked students themselves what aspects of school made success possible for them. Of the articles I reviewed, only this article and five others actually asked students what they needed to be successful in school (Berryman et al., 2014; MacIver, 2012; Preston & Claypool, 2013; Stelmach et al, 2017; Whitley, 2014). The remaining articles examined the central issue of how to help Canadian Aboriginal students be successful in school, but asked teachers and administrators what they thought, or reviewed literature that had asked teachers this question.
Teachers gain valuable information about what helps their students become and stay engaged in learning when they build relationships with and teach them, so I recognize that their perspectives are important, especially because teachers are the ones monitoring and assessing student progress. Principals also have valuable insights to offer when it comes to Aboriginal student school engagement, as they often deal with the resulting behaviours of disengaged students. However, I suggest that educators and principals have a limited view of this complex picture. It would be morally unjust to think that we educators and administrators who are living lives without the socioeconomic barriers and history of being a colonialized and stigmatized people, know more than, or even as much as, Aboriginal students do about what they need. We need to continue ask students questions about what they need to be successful and then listen carefully to their answers. More research in this area is sorely needed, to continue asking what these students need. As we ask more questions and listen more carefully, we might find that we are privileged in gaining more complex and meaningful insight into how to help our Indigenous students succeed in Canadian schools.
Chapter Three

Objective

Strong student-teacher connections can support and improve school experiences for Aboriginal elementary students in Canada, thereby improving their chances of staying in school. By reviewing recent and relevant literature, I have synthesized the important elements of relationship between Canadian teachers and their Indigenous students. This review has attempted to (a) inform Canadian teachers of the importance of establishing strong relationships with their Aboriginal students; (b) describe the characteristics of these relationships; (c) outline what these relationships can look like; and (d) describe the traits of teachers who build successful connections with their Aboriginal students.

Introduction

During the past 12 years of my elementary teaching career I have often witnessed Aboriginal students who appeared disconnected from their schooling experience. This observation has troubled me and is the reason I am researching the idea of strong teacher-student relationships being central to keeping our Aboriginal students connected and engaged at school. In Chapter One I told the story of groups of students who had made me aware that something important was missing from many Indigenous students’ lived experiences at school. Three years ago I completed my Restorative Justice Certificate with Simon Fraser University, and the learning I engaged in around Canada’s history with Aboriginal Peoples dumbfounded me. This learning experience, combined with my observations around the above-mentioned students has
directed my inquiry, and I feel a strong desire to do what I can to aid in reconciliation with 
Canada’s Aboriginal peoples through improving education for their youth.

Chapter One explains how I came to this idea of reconciliation through relationship in 
education and provides justification for the study by summarizing the following themes. The 
importance of staying in school (socio-economic factors linked to well-being), the notion that 
relationship with teachers is central to student learning, and that incorporating relevant, authentic 
Aboriginal content and ways of knowing and learning keeps students engaged. As well, I 
highlighted several prominent theories explaining why educational attainment is a struggle for 
many Aboriginal youth, including the continuing effects of colonialism, the legacy of trauma 
from residential schools, and different learning styles.

My two conclusions in Chapter One are that, as Canadian educators, we can play a role 
in reconciliation in two important ways. First, we can develop and maintain strong and 
educationally motivating relationships with our Aboriginal students to increase both their sense 
of teacher connection and their engagement in learning. And second, by authentically 
incorporating Aboriginal content, history, and beliefs in our classroom communities and 
teaching in a heartfelt and respectful way, to both ensure relevance of curriculum and inculcate a 
sense of belonging for our Aboriginal students, and compassionate learning for our non- 
Aboriginal students. I state that by being mindful of these two actions, I believe we can make a 
positive difference in the academic success of our Aboriginal students, and therefore their 
present and future well-being.
As I began to delve more deeply into the readings for my Chapter Two literature review, I decided to return my focus back to teacher-student relationship, my original passion. I began by addressing the extremely low high school graduation rates for Aboriginal youth to set the stage for why this issue was so important. My literature review followed the lead of Bazylak (2003) and focused on positive factors for school success. I assumed a strengths-based approach and asked the question: “What is going right?” of Aboriginal youth themselves, as well as teachers. I examined the four key themes that emerged: (1) why strong student-teacher relationships are so important to Aboriginal student success; (2) the characteristics of strong Aboriginal student-teacher relationships; (3) what these relationships can look like; and, (4) the characteristics of teachers who build strong relationships with their Aboriginal students. I then connected these examinations back to my research question and elucidated the importance of building these relationships. My literature review, at this time, is a living document – a draft that I will continually add to and rethink as I read and learn more about this topic.

**My Research/Project Steps:**

To help readers better understand my research method, I have outlined the steps I took to engage my research question below. I note that these steps were not always chronological, although I explicate them as such.

1. I reviewed articles discussing what factors build success for Canadian Aboriginal students and mine for issues and themes relating to strong teacher-student relationships.
I organized the data into overarching themes that emerge, then further organize these themes into subcategories, if such subcategories emerge.

2. Write my Chapters Two Literature Review detailing:
   - my perspective
   - background of the issue
   - themes that emerged
   - my ideas about what’s been found and why it matters
   - my thoughts on what’s still missing in the research (March 2019)

3. I continue to add to my Chapters Two literature review as I read and learn more about how these relationships can improve Aboriginal student engagement in school.

4. Write my Chapter Three research design, including intended dates for each step. (I have sense modified this chapter, as per research tradition to make it read in past tense, now that my study has been completed.)

5. Also as a note, the concluding section of Chapter Three regards my Chapter Five reflections, which present my main learnings regarding my inquiry question, identify and discuss the limits of my research and project, discuss the implications of what I’ve learned and recommendations I have for next steps, and outline the connections between all aspects of my research, findings, and writing.
6. I wrote my Chapter 5 conclusion and reflections. This chapter presents:

- my main learnings regarding my inquiry question
- identify and discuss the limits of my research and project
- discuss the implications of what I’ve learned and recommendations I have
- outline the connections between all aspects of my research, my synthesis, and writings.

Summary

My Chapter Three plan details the steps I have taken and will take to complete my master’s work. I begin by stating my research question and my project plan. I then outline my research and project steps, which began with reviewing relevant articles and mining those articles for issues relating to teacher-student relationships and then organizing the data into themes and categories. This step was followed by writing the first draft of my Chapter Two literature review, which includes my perspective, the background of the issue, the four themes that emerged, my ideas about what’s been found, why it matters, and where to go with the information, and my thoughts on what’s still missing in the research.

Again, I note that I will continue to add to my literature review as I read and learn more about how these relationships can strengthen Aboriginal student engagement in school. I do not see my work in this area as close to being completed.
Chapter Four: Findings and Power Point

Chapter One explained the purpose behind my research. Briefly reviewed, Indigenous students in Canada continue to graduate from high school at a rate far behind that of non-Indigenous students. The purpose of my study was to look at how strong teacher-student relationships might keep Indigenous students connected and engaged at school so that their graduation rates match or exceed those of non-Indigenous students. Chapter Two was my literature review. In that chapter, I reviewed recent and relevant literature that centered around asking Indigenous students and their teachers what helped them stay motivated to complete high school. Chapter Three laid out the process for my thesis.

Chapter Four provides a summary of my findings in the forms of writing and a power point. Throughout the summary of findings, relevant screen shots of the power point are embedded. The full power point can be found in the appendix.

Revisiting the Purpose

As discussed at length in Chapter One, it is well-known that Canadian Indigenous students struggle with academic success in our public schools. They are less likely to experience success and feel connected to their teachers and are therefore less likely to graduate from high school than non-Indigenous students. As such, these young people continue to live lives that are often plagued by economic hardship and resulting limited health and wellness.
This study examined the factors that increase these students’ experiences with feeling connected to their teachers and therefore staying in school. My goal was to help all of us, as teachers and as a system, work with Indigenous students as a way to help them graduate so they might therefore have opportunities for increased economic opportunities in their lives. The purpose of examining this information was specifically to help Canadian teachers increase their knowledge in this area to help them develop and maintain the strong relationships with their Indigenous students that will keep them connected and engaged in their school experiences and beyond.

Figure 1. Reason for the study. This figure illustrates the importance of keeping our Indigenous students in school: As of 2015 (most recent stats available), there was approximately a 20% difference between the graduation rates of non-Aboriginal and Aboriginal students in both Canada and British Columbia.
Summary of Findings

For the purpose of this study, I reviewed 23 scholarly journals and documents to look for answers to my question of how we keep our Indigenous students connected and engaged so at school. The articles I reviewed were those that focused on asking Indigenous students, their teachers, and to a lesser degree their principals, what factors helped them stay engaged and motivated through their schooling experiences. I also looked to authentically-created Indigenous documents to find out what factors are important to Canada’s First Peoples regrading their children’s education. I focused on these articles and documents so that I could gain a true and authentic picture of what these students need to be successful in school.

Four clear themes emerged in the examination of the literature I examined to complete my research project. They were: (a) why strong student-teacher relationships are so important to Aboriginal student success; (b) the characteristics that define these relationships; (c) what these relationships could look like and how they could be developed; and (d) the characteristics of teachers who build strong relationships with their Aboriginal students.

Note that I am writing this chapter as more of an essay than a literature review. I encourage readers who would like to connect specific findings to the literature to note Chapter Two, which is written more as a literature review. All photos in my power point are cited in the references list at the end of this thesis. None of the images include people from School District 71 and all were taken from photos already in the public domain.
Theme One: Why is it so important to develop strong relationships with our Indigenous students?

The literature reinforced a strong correlation between positive student-teacher relationships and student learning. The development of these relationships has a critical impact on student engagement and achievement. Aboriginal students who feel valued and respected and whose academic challenges are met are more likely to experience high levels of school satisfaction, be more academically engaged, and are more likely to exhibit positive attitudes and values at school.

Students who enjoy close and positive relationships with their teachers are more engaged: they work harder in the classroom, persevere when things are difficult, accept their teacher’s direction and feedback, manage stress more easily, and listen more carefully to their teachers. These findings were supported by teachers, students, and observers throughout the literature.
Figure 2. Relationship is first. This figure illustrates the importance of relationship in school, as described by Alberta First Nation, Métis, and Inuit Elders. Image courtesy of The Learning Circle, 2010. Retrieved from https://www.aadnc-aandc.gc.ca/DAM/DAM-INTER-HQ/STAGING/texte-text/ach_lr_ks_clsrs_learningcircle_lc47_1316538044949_eng.pdf

The importance of relationship is well understood by Alberta First Nation, Métis, and Inuit Elders. In fact, it has become one of the five guiding principles of the *Our Words, Our Ways* (2005) document. *Our Words, Our Ways* (2005) is a resource that offers educators information about Aboriginal cultures and perspectives, practical ideas, and strategies that will help teachers meet the needs and recognize the gifts of Aboriginal students. The third guiding principle in the document describes teacher/student relationship as being the key factor in each student’s school success.

Powerful indicators of success for students that result from strong relationships with dedicated and inspirational teachers include improved self-concept, increased motivation to
learn, an “inner hope or fire”, increased attendance rates, increased feelings of security and attachment, being committed, driven and harbouring post-secondary aspirations, and an increased desire to improve society. The positive power of relationship for Aboriginal students is an important part of the welcoming environment that is needed if Indigenous students are to succeed in school. The imperativeness for Canadian educators to strengthen their bonds with Aboriginal students is vividly apparent.

Advocates for the gravity of positive student-teacher relationships, students and teachers alike, claim these relational bonds must be forged before academics can be focused on. Teachers must come to know their students’ strengths, interests, learning challenges, and the context of their lives. Teachers can then design appropriate curriculum that will help meet student learning needs, as well as come to better know their students’ talents of and therefore be able to celebrate the individual successes that their students reach. When these steps are enacted, student motivation is increased. This student motivation encourages additional learning, which begins a positive cycle of success for students – often something they have not often experienced. School suddenly becomes a place where students can “belong.”

There is agreement among teachers and students that feeling disconnected, disengaged, invisible, and unable to ask for academic help strongly contribute to dropping out of high school. Clearly, by spending time getting to know their students before jumping into the curricular and pedagogical choices all teachers must make daily, educators can create spaces that invite student successes throughout the school year. In effect, teachers can help engage students in learning and
sustain that engagement. It seems that good teaching is both about curricular content and about intentionally knowing and reaching every student.

With the exception of students who did not have supportive relationships with their teachers, all students in the literature I reviewed identified positive connections with teachers as being either the most, or one of the most, important aspects of their educational. In fact, evidence indicates that children most at risk for school failure and eventual drop-out (because of risk factors associated with low socioeconomic status and being of a minority) are those who generally experience fewer supportive relationships with their teachers, but who are most affected by the quality of their connections with teachers. Furthermore, from an ethos of caring, all children deserve adults in their lives who care for them and help them feel like they belong. Those tasks have always been a key part of the work that teachers engage in with all children.

However, the importance of building strong, positive connections specifically with Indigenous students is even clearer. If we are to help these students find success in school, stay in school, and enjoy their schooling experience, our responsibility as teachers is to connect with them in ways that encourage and support. The findings of the literature provide both evidence and compelling reasons for teachers to put their energies into establishing strong and nourishing rapports with their Aboriginal students.

**Theme Two: What characterizes supportive teacher-student relationships?**

The overarching principles that emerged from the research as creating the foundation for such positive relationships were mutual respect, honesty, safety, feeling valued and recognized, mutual trust, and open communication. Many Aboriginal students highlighted safety as a
positive influence on their schooling. Some students, both non-Indigenous and Indigenous, have been abused and many live in emotionally charged households, where basic needs for emotional and or physical health are not being met. Respect is another fundamental part of any supportive relationship. In Ojibwe, respect means that people are treated as if they are sacred and have a place in the world. Students are more likely to trust teachers who they feel care about them and their learning, which contributes to positive interactions with teachers and beneficial feelings about being at school. Together, mutual respect and trust create a strong sense of equality in relationships, which is another fundamental characteristic of good teacher-student relationships.

Adopting a relational leadership style as opposed to an individualistic one is one way of recognizing how Aboriginal cultures function. Relational leadership is based upon the following characteristics: collaboration, caring, courage, intuition and vision. Developing relationships with students that are defined by mutual respect and equality can set the groundwork for student motivation and engagement. Classroom cultures of equality, where discipline is provided through non-authoritative means, such as building community and solving problems through by using talking circles and open discussion, are powerful ways to help students remain motivated and engaged in the classroom culture. Working within a relational leadership culture is a dynamic way of connecting with students.
Theme Three: What Can These Relationships Look Like, and How to Develop Them?

What can, or do, strong student teacher relationships look like? And, where, when, and how do strong student teacher relationships come about? Strong and supportive student-teacher relationships take time and consistency to develop and they blossom in welcoming spaces teachers and administrators together create.

These relationships are forged in myriad ways: by teachers spending time tutoring struggling students, either individually or in small groups, at recess or lunch, after school, or during their prep blocks. They happen while teachers lead after school fine arts or sports activities for students. Trust deepens when students feel they are important to their teachers, and

Figure 3. The characteristics of strong teacher-student relationships. Talking Circles were found to be important to Aboriginal students. Photo courtesy of North Shore Restorative Justice Society, 2017. Retrieved from https://www.nsrj.ca/programs/schools-initiative
relationships are strengthened when students can speak openly about personal difficulties and receive deep listening and positive role-modelling in return.

For some female Aboriginal high school students, teachers who sometimes play a counsellor-like role can be helpful. A powerful factor for success occurs when teachers become and show they are interested in their students’ lives and seek to find out what lies behind negative student behaviours, rather than just reacting to what is on the surface. It is clear that Aboriginal students benefit from compassion and caring in their relationships with their teachers, and this lesson is an incredibly valuable one for educators: lead with the heart, and the brain will follow.

![Figure 4. Developing and maintaining strong teacher-student relationships](image)

*Figure 4. Developing and maintaining strong teacher-student relationships.* This slide highlights the key ways that teachers can work to develop strong relationships with their students.
Strong relationships are established when teachers structure time and space in their classrooms for one-on-one interactions with their students. Strong relationships are built when teachers use Aboriginal structures, such as talking circles, to promote mutually respectful dialogue and develop problem-solving skills, where teachers and students make decisions together.

Honouring traditional Aboriginal values by using talking circles and restorative justice practices, rather than traditional methods of discipline, creates space for strong relationship building within the school context. The use of talking circles is an authentic way to build relational leadership and developing feelings of equality between teacher and student, and the using the practice of talking circles is defined by many Aboriginal youth as an important practice that keeps them wanting to be in school.

Teachers must build and use consistent, fair structures and class routines to create a sense of community in the classroom so students feel emotionally and physically safe. Sometimes being appropriately physically close can strengthen the bond between a teacher and student, such as with hand-holding, touching gently on arm, shoulder, or head, and hugging with primary students. Using nicknames for students and getting down to a child or a teen’s physical level while talking or working together were also often defined as signs of a positive relationship by students.

Creating spaces and classrooms that are supportive, nurturing, and caring are vital to student learning. Building a climate of trust so that students want to learn from their teachers is crucial. These positive relationships are defined by another important trait – flexibility.
Flexibility can be provided in small acts, such as extended due dates when they are needed or honouring and welcoming varied learning styles and ways of showing learning. Students feel supported by teachers who are flexible with assignment due dates and who maintain a calm and emotionally safe classroom environment.

Teacher professionalism is paramount in any student-teacher relationship, meaning that, although teachers should be open and honest with students during informal conversations or joking, teachers must keep an appropriate level of disclosure themselves, always maintaining healthy boundaries. Teachers must always remember that their first task is to provide support for their students. Relationships that foster a positive work ethic, encourage academic success, and set high expectations for Aboriginal students are the kinds of behaviours that help all children succeed.

Students themselves and their teachers both know what kinds of teacher-student relationships they need to experience success in school. This fact leads me to question why such success doesn’t happen more often. Of course, the teacher participants in the studies I read might not be indicative of the general population of Canadian teachers and might have been more self-reflective in terms of how they can best serve Aboriginal students. Regardless, the above examples indicate the endless opportunities that are open to Canadian teachers for building and nurturing strong and positive connections with their Aboriginal students, as well as demonstrating the value of these relationships to these students.
Theme Four: Characteristics of Teachers Who Build Strong Relationships

For students, teachers are either the central help or hindrance to their school success. The relational capabilities of effective teachers and how these relationships impact student learning include teacher empathetic responsiveness, which builds student-teacher connection; teacher disposition, which positively influences or thwarts relationship with students; and, teacher consideration of student lives, including Indigenous sensitivities, which helps students feel accepted and understood. The common threads running through these capabilities are that teachers care about their students as people and want to help them succeed in school.

A large number of teacher characteristics help build strong relationships with Aboriginal students: these include being genuinely caring, having an open heart and mind, being patient and flexible, being a good listener, being genuine and therefore credible, and having a sense of humour. These are the teacher traits deemed most essential by students and teachers alike. Student self-esteem is directly affected by how teachers relate to them, and teachers who respect their students as people demonstrate another key teacher trait.

Other important qualities of teachers who build strong relationships with their students include responding to students in a timely manner, anticipating student needs and emotions, providing frequent and honest feedback to students, reaching all students by getting to know their learning styles so they can be taught and assessed accordingly, and focusing on what learners can do, instead of what they cannot.
Positive teacher attributes include having a sense of humour. Humour emerged as important in two ways: first, humour is a tool to connect, engage, and keep students interested; second, by laughing at themselves when they make mistakes teachers show that mistakes are human, are not the end of the world, and can be resolved. Humour alleviates frustration.

Another critical teacher trait that emerged was that of acting and speaking in positive ways that help students feel accepted and supported. Teachers must show they are interested in their students and their success; can listen to how stress, jobs, and family issues can impact...
student lives; and, are also willing to find ways to help their students succeed. These teachers keep Aboriginal youth motivated to stay in school because they feel supported and inspired.

The teacher trait of self-reflection is another integral component to successfully building relationships with and teaching their Indigenous students, where teachers critically reflect upon their practice and how their own investment and enjoyment in the job, or lack thereof, impacts their students. This trait is evident in teachers who don’t show frustration towards students who are challenged by something academic, who meet the needs of students who require more challenging work, and who appear to enjoy their jobs.

The literature was clear that students themselves know exactly what teacher characteristics help them succeed in school. After reading the literature, I have come to strongly believe our moral and ethical responsibility as teachers is to listen to what these youths are saying. They are telling us, in no uncertain terms, what they need from their teachers to be academically successful. We would be wise to listen.
Figure 6. Revisiting the purpose behind the study. As this slide suggests, this research study is grounded upon the belief that Canadian teachers must play an active role in the reconciliation of Aboriginal students by working to build strong relationships with these students. Photo courtesy of University of Alberta Libraries (2019). Retrieved from https://guides.library.ualberta.ca/residential-schools/truth-and-reconciliation-commission

Summary

This chapter gives an in-depth summary of my findings both in writing and with visual summary in the form of a power point (see Appendix A). The literature reviewed suggested four key themes regarding how to keep Indigenous students connected at school. First, the importance of strong teacher-student relationships is explored. Second, the characteristics of these supportive relationships are defined. Third, the ways that teachers develop these relationships and what these can look like are examined. And fourth, the most common traits of
the teachers who build these relationships are identified. The materials reviewed for this thesis come are mainly qualitative studies that give voice to Canadian Indigenous students and their teachers.
Chapter Five

Introduction

Reconciliation between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples is one of Canada’s top priorities, as it needs to be. Reconciliation is defined as a situation in which two people or two groups of people become friendly again after they have argued seriously or fought (Cambridge English Dictionary, 2019). How do we as Canadians work on “becoming friendly again?” I think the work begins with developing knowledge, understanding, and compassion. It is every Canadian’s responsibility to learn about the wrongs put on Indigenous peoples in our country’s past, including but not limited to residential schools, as well as expressions of racism that continue today, such as the fact that in 2011 Aboriginal children accounted for 7% of all children in Canada but for almost one-half (48%) of all children in the care of the Ministry (Turner, 2016).

We must develop understanding and compassion around the continuing intergenerational affects of residential schools and having basic rights and dignities refused to First Peoples, and the struggles that ensue in trying to overcome racism and lack of dignity. Building relationship is the foundation for reconciliation. Teachers play a unique role in the building of these relationships and moving reconciliation forward, in that we can directly affect and improve the life chances for our Indigenous students. I see this as teachers’ unique responsibility and privilege.

Children from lower socio-economic status are overall less positively connected to their teachers, which leads to poorer school outcomes, and often to a life of reduced socio-economic
expectation (see Chapter One for more detail). We can make a difference by working on our relationships with these students to keep them in school through graduation. Because high school graduation is a measure of educational attainment and socio-economic status, and educational attainment and income are linked positively to well-being, it is imperative that we improve academic success for our Aboriginal students.

This chapter concludes my thesis. A summary of the research is presented. The significance of this research in the immediate context of the continuing crisis of Indigenous education is examined, as are potential limitations and next steps.

To review my research project, I began Chapter One by choosing a question dear to my heart; how can we keep our Indigenous students connected and in school? Through my readings I discovered that for these students, strong teacher-student relationships were central to this purpose. I then narrowed my focus to looking at the question, how can we keep our Indigenous students connected at school through strong teacher-student relationships?

In Chapter Two I reviewed 23 articles and documents in my literature review that focused on this area and found four themes: (a) why strong teacher-student relationships are so important; (b) what the characteristics are of these supportive relationships; (c) what the key traits of teachers who build these relationships are; and (d) what these relationships can look like and ways to develop them.

In Chapter Three I revisited the purpose of this research project, the goal of which is to support and enhance Canadian teachers’ dedication to ‘bridge the education gap’ between
Indigenous and non-Indigenous students through the development and maintenance of strong relationships with these students. I then outlined the steps remaining for the work.

In Chapter Four I summarized my findings of the four themes identified above and created a power point as a visual summary of the findings. The power point is attached in Appendix A.

The ultimate purpose of this work, as noted above, is to support and guide teachers in their dedication to helping Indigenous students succeed in school, through building strong relationships. Striving towards this goal will result in improving the high school completion rates of Indigenous students, which will increase their opportunities for post-secondary education and lift many of the socio-economic barriers that currently stand in the way for young people who do not graduate from high school.

Summary of the Research

The literature reviewed presents four key findings. These themes were: (a) Why are strong teacher-student relationships so important? (b) What are the characteristics of strong teacher-student relationships? (c) What are the key traits of teachers who develop these relationships with their Indigenous students? and (d) How might teachers develop these relationships, and what might they look like?

The first finding answers the question of why student teacher connections are so necessary. The answer is simple: Aboriginal students who have positive connections with their teachers and who feel their academic needs are being met enjoy school more become and stay engaged in learning and are much more likely to graduate from high school. These youths are
also more likely to go on to post-secondary education, to earn more money, and to therefore gain a higher socio-economic status and sense of self-worth, directly and positively affecting their physical, psychological, and emotional well-being.

The second key theme deals with the characteristics of strong teacher-student relationships. These supportive relationships are characterised by the guiding principles of mutual respect, trust, equality, honesty, compassion, physical, and emotional safety. These supportive relationships are grounded in high expectations of learners, marked by flexibility for due dates, and an acceptance and nurturing of different learning styles.

The third key finding deals with what these strong teacher-student relationships can look like and how they might be built. These relationships take time and consistency to build. These relationships can develop during times when teachers lead after-school activities and spend time visiting or joking with students, while they help struggling students understand difficult concepts or get them caught up on work. They can include physical closeness and some affection, in particular, with primary and elementary school-age students. Finally, good teacher-student relationships flourish when students feel encouraged, accepted, and supported, culturally, academically, and emotionally.

The fourth key finding details the most common traits of teachers who build relationships that matter with their Aboriginal students. These teachers are genuine and open while maintaining an appropriate level of privacy about their own lives. They make friendly jokes and laugh at themselves when they make mistakes. These teachers hold high expectations for their students and support students by celebrating their successes. They act as role models for positive
behaviours, and relate to their students in non-confrontive, equalitarian ways. They create welcoming classes and spaces for their students, and they use their knowledge of student strengths, interests, and challenges to design relevant and interesting curriculum. They value and honour all types of learning and learners. These are the teachers who help their Aboriginal students succeed.

Reflection

For this literature review I reviewed articles that had been written as recently as possible. My reason for doing this follows. Only during the past five to ten years have the truths of our colonial past begun to emerge. These truths include the impact of residential schools and how we have mistreated our First Peoples. This mistreatment and consequent near-eradication of First Peoples cultures has led to the despairing state of Indigenous rates of high-school completion and resulting low economic status and quality of life. As these truths have become known, I believe many Canadian teachers are beginning to develop a personal vision of what reconciliation means to them. The voices of our Indigenous youth, their families and elders, and the teachers who work to support their educational success need to be the voices that help support and guide these visions of reconciliation.

Bazylak’s (2003) qualitative study, which examined the factors for success of high school completion for five Aboriginal female students, was the earliest study I could find that asked students themselves what aspects of school made success possible for them. As I had noted earlier, of the articles I reviewed, only this article and five others asked students themselves what they needed to be successful in school (Berryman et al., 2014; MacIver, 2012;
Preston & Claypool, 2013; Stelmach et al, 2017; Whitley, 2014). The remaining articles examined the central issue of how to help Canadian Aboriginal students be successful in school, but asked teachers and administrators what they thought, or reviewed literature that asked teachers this question (Burym, 2016; Castellon, 2017; Goulet, 2005; Oskineegish, 2015; Preston et al., 2015; Stockdale et al., 2013).

One last reflection I have is that it must be acknowledged that building strong relationships is important for helping all students succeed, Indigenous or not. However, given the Canadian Education crisis that exists for students of Indigenous origin and the responsibility we share as Canadians and as teachers, it is crucial that, as teachers, we don’t forget to also focus our energies on building strong relationships with our Indigenous students so that their chances for success in school are increased.

**Potential Limitations**

Teachers gain valuable information about what helps their students become and stay engaged in learning when they build relationships with and teach them, so I recognize that their perspectives are important. These perspectives are especially important because teachers are the ones monitoring and assessing student progress. Principals also have valuable insights to offer when it comes to Aboriginal students’ school engagement, because principals often deal with the resulting behaviours of disengaged students.

However, I suggest that educators and principals have a limited view of this complex picture. It would be morally unjust to think that we educators and administrators who are living lives without the socioeconomic barriers and history of being a colonialized and stigmatized
people, know more than, or even as much as, Aboriginal students do about what they need. As well, I myself am a Caucasian female who can only see through my privileged lens of middle-class teacher, and I have had to interpret the findings of my research as such.

Looking Forward

This research project has looked deeply at and listened carefully to what students, their families, and their caring teachers have said about helping Indigenous students feel connected, valued, and successful in school. I have attempted to put all the pieces together into a cohesive picture. More research in this area is needed and this research must be respectfully engaged by the teachers and administrators of Indigenous students in Canada, as well as by policy makers and other stakeholders.

The next step I see in this work would be to support teachers as they work to develop the relational capacities discussed in this thesis, with the aim of bridging the gap in education between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students in Canadian schools. It is my hope and my belief that, if Canadian educators work to develop both these traits in themselves and these types of relationships with their Indigenous students, we can increase the numbers of Indigenous students who complete high school, with the ultimate goal being to substantially improve the health and well-being of Canada’s First Peoples.
References


Appendix A: Bridging the Gap Power Point

Bridging the Gap for our Indigenous Learners Through Relationship

By Sarah BeynonBrown
Vancouver Island University
March 2019
“all learning is based, first of all, on relationship. Offering kindness, trust and a positive awareness of family and culture sets the stage for students to feel welcome and to want to attend school every day”

Our Words, Our Ways, 2005

Improving School Experiences for our Indigenous Learners Through Strong Teacher-Student Relationships
Observations About Many Of My Indigenous Learners:

- often keep to themselves
- quieter learners
- often seem disengaged
- sometimes need more time to reflect and process

Why is it so important to focus on our Indigenous learners?

Because if Indigenous learners’ needs aren’t being met, they are far less likely to graduate from high school.

Compare:

- 84% of non-Indigenous students in British Columbia graduated in 2015.
- 63% of Indigenous students in British Columbia graduated in 2015.
- 88% is the national average for secondary school completion.
- The national average is 64% for Indigenous students.

Stats Canada, 2011
While graduation rates are slowly rising for Indigenous students in Canada, they are still much lower than the overall graduation rate.

According to Statistics Canada, simply being of Indigenous origin doubles the likelihood of dropping out of high school (2009).

Because high school graduation is a measure of educational attainment and socio-economic status, and educational attainment and income are linked positively to well-being, it is imperative that we improve academic success for our Indigenous students.

We must recognize that we need to make sure all our learners are seen and cared for, but especially our Indigenous learners. It is our responsibility.
Four Key Themes That Emerged from the Literature:

**Why** strong teacher-student connections are so important for our Indigenous students

**What** the characteristics are of supportive teacher-student relationships

**Ways** to develop these relationships and **What** they can look like

**What** the characteristics are of teachers who build these relationships

Why are strong teacher-student relationships so important?

“Almost to a person, dropouts complain that they could not get or were too embarrassed to ask for the academic help they needed and got ‘lost in the crowd’” (Schoenleibn, 2004; in Maciver, 2012, p.17)

Indigenous students who feel valued and respected and whose academic challenges are met are more likely to experience high levels of school satisfaction, are more academically engaged, and are more likely to exhibit positive attitudes and values at school (Burym, 2016).

*These students* are the ones who stay in school.
Other indicators of success for Indigenous students that result from positive student-teacher relationships:

- improved self-concept
- increased motivation to learn
- increased attendance rates
- increased feelings of security and attachment
- increased desire to improve society

(Burym, 2016; Goulet, 2005)

With the exception of students who did not have supportive relationships with their teachers, all students in the literature I reviewed identified positive connections with teachers as being either the most, or one of the most, important aspects of their educational success.

(Goulet, 2005; Maclver, 2012; Bazylik, 2003)
Characteristics of supportive teacher-student relationships:

**Foundations:**
- Mutual respect, honesty, students feeling safe, valued, and recognized, mutual trust, equality, open communication.

**These Relationships:**
- Take time and consistency to develop.
- Blossom in welcoming spaces created by routines and structures that create a sense of consistency and a feeling of safety and security, both emotionally and physically.
- Set the groundwork for student motivation and engagement.
- Use non-authoritative means of discipline (building community and problem solving through talking circles, open discussions).


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**What are the characteristics of teachers who build these relationships?**

- Being genuinely caring.
- Having an ‘open heart’.
- Being patient and flexible.
- Having high expectations.
- Having a sense of humour.
- Being open in dialogue.
- Being fun-loving.
- Being a good listener.

These are the key teacher traits deemed to be most essential by Indigenous students and teachers alike.

Ways teachers develop these relationships, and What they can look like:

- Be open and honest, but also keep an appropriate level of disclosure.
- Foster a positive work ethic in students, encouraging their academic success.
- Get to know students' strengths and challenges in order to plan interesting and academically appropriate activities for them.
- Being physically close, touching on the head, holding hands (more so with primary students, working side by side.
- Lead after school fine arts clubs or sports activities for students.
- Structure time into classrooms for one-on-one interactions with students, visiting with each throughout the day.

Again, why is this important?

I believe it is our responsibility as Canadian educators to play our part in reconciliation by developing strong and educationally motivating relationships with our Indigenous students that enhance their school experiences and increase their chances of academic success.
References


References cont’d

References cont’d


