Incorporating Aboriginal understandings to improve support for students with learning disabilities: a self-study

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Because of the diversity involved in Special Education, it is often difficult to focus on one topic in particular that can be deemed the most pertinent in a given classroom. There are every day successes, such as students learning a new skill, building a sense of community within the classroom, or better understanding their strengths and abilities. Likewise, there are also major issues to be dealt with on a daily basis: lack of attendance, students being several grades behind, lack of funding, lack of motivation and various emotional/behavioural issues all within one classroom. With all of these issues at play, it is often difficult to decipher what task needs to be tackled first. Everyone involved in the field of education strives to ensure that we do right by our students, and that we are not only covering content, but making sure that students feel welcomed and safe within our classrooms. To create this environment, I want to ensure that I am also including students’ culture and beliefs within my practice (First Nations Education Steering Committee, 2014).

Generally, and often out of necessity, teachers’ experiences are at the forefront of how a classroom environment is established. The educators’ prior knowledge, skills and understandings are how a class is structured, because one can only assume the learned experiences and knowledges of others. This can be a major hindrance to a learning environment when working in a culturally different school setting. For non-Indigenous educators working within a First Nations’ school, this gap in cultural practices can create a rift between teacher and student in being able to properly communicate, connect and establish a strong foundation for learning. Weenie (2010) insists that aboriginal “identity, worldview and philosophy, is informed by language and culture” (p. 2). Without having the basis of language and culture as a specific reference, educators may be at a loss to appreciate the role that both play within aboriginal student education.
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Special Education Context

Cook and Schirmer (2003) note that “contemporary critiques suggest that special education, among other things, is unnecessarily and unfairly over-representative of minority students, uses labels and categories that are without educational merit and result in stigmatization and decreased expectations” (p. 200). This stigmatization may lead to many potential impacts socially, emotionally, and academically. Gair, Thomson and Miles (2005) comment that:

When those who have power to name and to socially construct reality choose not to see you or hear you... when someone with the authority of a teacher, say, describes the world and you are not in it, there is a moment of psychic disequilibrium, as if you looked into a mirror and saw nothing” (p. 179).

Those who are marginalized may suffer from low self-esteem, have feelings of exclusion or racism, or feel absent and lack motivation towards their own education. By learning how it is that aboriginal students learn best and giving meaning and purpose to the wealth of knowledge and identities that they bring to the table so-to-speak, a shift in the educational practice of non-indigenous teachers could help garner growth, motivation and understanding.

The approach to independent styles of teachings in Aboriginal education is a fairly new concept. Castellano (2000) noted that it was only in the late 1980s/early 1990s that there was “a call for special remedial programs to deal with the unique needs of Native students. This is in keeping with focus on special programs, initiated during this period, to deal with students from other cultures” (p. 14).

Aboriginal students comprise approximately ten percent of students in British Columbia’s provincial schools yet, according to Richards (2009) research, 8.4 percent of non-aboriginal students do not complete grade twelve, compared with 32.7 percent of Aboriginal students. If aboriginal students aren’t learning the way we teach, then it is time to shift the paradigm and begin to teach the way that they learn.


**Personal Context**

I started my teaching career 8 years ago when I moved to South Korea to teach English to middle school students in a village outside of Seoul. It was here that my fascination with learning how to bridge gaps between myself and students culturally diverse from me began. Not only was language a barrier, as were cultural norms, gender roles and pop culture references that were clearly lost in translation between us.

After my time in South Korea, I moved back to Canada and began substituting at numerous public schools, again being exposed to many social classes and communities with varying school cultures and environments. After my time in the school district, I moved to London, England, where I again worked as a supply teacher and had short-term contracts within various schools and grades throughout southeast London. I was able to better connect with students in these areas, perhaps because I myself was an outsider to some extent and could relate to the pressures, confusions and new beginnings that come from being from another part of the world.

Finally, when I moved back to Canada, 5 years ago, I began substituting at a First Nations band school, which eventually led to a fulltime position, where I currently teach high school English and Social Studies, as well as teach the Special Education life skills program. Not being from the community, I have again been exposed to new beliefs, norms and cultural differences that arise daily within my classroom. These differences have helped strengthen my abilities as a teacher, I believe, because it is human nature to want to connect with others, and by teaching so many different groups of students, I have found that there is always a desire and a possibility to want to learn, to be accepted and to grow.

Being a high school teacher, my main focus is ensuring that my already marginalized students are not slipping further through the cracks of the educational system. Within my classroom, I have various levels of abilities, designations, both behavioural and intellectual, and without any educational assistant (EA) support. It can be difficult, sometimes near impossible, to attempt to meet the needs of
everyone in the room simultaneously, and often I feel that the pressures of education are being placed on children who are unprepared for the mainstream academic setting. Sometimes there is a need to go back to basic foundation skills of reading and writing and progress learning from there. The onus for change and adaptation needs to be on the teacher rather than the student.

Many of the courses I teach are at the senior level, where certain demands are already placed on the teacher. There are so many roles we have to play and tasks that need to be completed in such a short period of time, that teacher burnout, especially at my school where the most senior teacher has been there for seven years, is a serious problem. It is my job to ensure that my students are not only being set up for future success, but also to make sure that they are prepared to perform well during Provincial exams. This becomes exceedingly difficult when work that does not get accomplished in the classroom, when sent home, will almost certainly never get completed there either. As humans, we take pride in being able to accomplish tasks and being good at certain things, and simply not having the capacity to do something can be painful and discouraging. Oftentimes, my students who have a learning disability or educational delay, struggle to find academic support beyond school hours.

As demanding as curriculum and data are, student progress starts with scaffolding on skills that are already mastered. By learning the prior knowledge and experiences of students, connections can be made linking their understandings to new information. I need to challenge my perspectives on what education is supposed to look like, and view it for what it is, within whatever given classroom or course I am teaching.

The Senate Standing Committee on Aboriginal People (2006) said that “there is a deep mistrust among some Aboriginal people of mainstream educational institutions. The importance of obtaining a good education becomes secondary to what may be perceived as a further assimilative assault on Aboriginal culture, language and tradition” (cited in Richards, 2009, p. 37). I see firsthand the changes and strides that are being taken within the realm of aboriginal education, yet there is still a gap between
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the education system, and very much so in my classroom, on how to include cultural knowledge and experiences within the lessons.

My intention within both my practice and my classroom is to create a safe environment for learning and inclusion. I want to not only help my students value their education, but to have them feel acknowledged, represented and valued within my classroom boundaries and beyond. My learning focus then is to find ways to help make these goals a reality, not only for myself but for other teachers who find themselves beyond the educational scope of their own personal identities and ways of knowing, and are wanting specific insight on the barriers and successes that can come from working within indigenous communities.

Statement of Problem

While working at an independent reserve school, I have found the experience dramatically different from the much larger, public schools I have worked at. Being in such a small setting, I know every student by name, we eat lunch together, and I have occasionally been invited and attended various cultural ceremonies, gatherings and events. Because of this shift in teacher-student dynamics, I feel I have gotten to know my students quite well. However, I often find that lack of knowledge and understanding of aboriginal culture and protocols, on my part, can hinder or entirely inhibit my abilities to gain access to my students academically. There are different procedures for how daily routines occur, how schedules are followed, and how teachings are taught from that of non-aboriginal society. Weenie (2008) writes that education informs oppression for indigenous students in that it is “the struggle to have our knowledge, our languages, and our cultures recognized and made integral to […] curriculum” (12). Without fair representation and acknowledgement within ministry mandated materials, the experiences of indigenous people can often fall to the wayside in classroom lessons.

The Canadian Policy Research Network (2009) states that “virtually all education gaps among marginalized minorities stress the importance of affirming the inherent value in the minority culture-
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both for its intrinsic worth and as means to improve performance in core academic skills” (p. 41). It has proven quite difficult for me to learn to fuse together the lifestyles of my aboriginal students with special needs, with the educational capacities expected within the BC curriculum. It can be stressful, at times difficult and often shied away from, for educators to look beyond their own experiences and learn to envelope other cultural histories into their lesson plans because this is the norm for how education has been approached for generations. Greene (2004) calls this “the ways in which meanings have been sedimented in an individual’s own personal history” (p. 146). Education has historically been so entrenched on examining the world through the lens of Western dominated ideologies, leaving little room for other voices or perspectives to be heard.

With this in mind, my research question is: How do I incorporate aboriginal cultural understandings in my practice to improve how I support students with learning disabilities?

Methodology

There are a number of strategies that I plan to attempt in answering this question, which I feel would be best approached by self-study research. With self-study research, I must include myself within the discoveries of what does/does not work for my students and the community, and how to alter and expand my practice to make room for personal, professional and program growth. Self-study “doesn’t claim to know a truth but rather seeks to understand what is” (Lassonde, 2009, pg. 8). There is a definite balance and respect that needs to be garnered here, in regards to ensuring that values and beliefs are not being neglected or mistreated when focusing on how to meet special education needs in order to help students be successful academically. This will be an issue in itself, in that defining success can mean different things to different groups. With these findings, I hope to reflect and describe some lessons and strategies I have learned within my “community of practice.”

Self-study can be viewed as a reform tool in rethinking how teachers learn to teach (Hamilton, 1998). During teacher’s college, student teachers are advised to be intrinsically aware of their practices,
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students’ patterns of learning, how to grow, adapt and learn from our lessons and classes. However, upon entering the field as a professional, these strategies often go to the wayside, as we fall into habits, routines and a sense of comfort. “The assertion [here] is that self-study serves a dual purpose: as a means to promote reflective teaching and as a substantive end of teacher education in its own right” (Dinkelman, 2003, p. 7). This approach promotes teachers to continuously learn and evolve with their craft; it also leaves room for collaboration, and growth in the profession of teaching.

Overview of study

In my research, I have investigated and asserted myself within my questions, my practice, and my own experiences to reveal what it is that I am doing as an educator to promote connections between aboriginal ways of knowing and student education. I have explored the processes and ways of aboriginal teachings to see if there is overlap in the styles with non-aboriginal teachings that I can then use within my own classroom. Again, I have tried to incorporate aboriginal cultural understandings in my practice to improve how I can support students with learning disabilities.

I have done this by writing a reflective journal, where I have recorded my daily thoughts and questions. My main focuses are: who I am as a teacher where I further examine my curiosities, interests and values, what aboriginal cultural practices complement or align with current classroom topics and ideas, and what choices and activities do I use in my planning and teaching. I used these journals to reflect on the knowledge and insights I have gained, and the major themes that emerged from the process. Though there are limitations to self-study research, such as bias, subjectivity and the inability to generalize, it also provides value in transferability and confirmability from first-hand experience.
Chapter Two: Literature Review

My literature review focuses on the 21st century climate for Aboriginal education. My first topic of focus is *The Current State of Aboriginal Education*, where I examine the federal government’s role in aboriginal education, and the creation of residential schools, as well as how finances are allocated for First Nations students. Secondly, the topic of *Non-Aboriginal Educators working with First Nations Students* looks how non-aboriginal teachers and aboriginal students connect within the classroom. Thirdly, *Different Ways of Knowing* looks at the juxtaposition between European and Indigenous ways of knowing, and how each is of individual value and importance. *Four Aspects of Learning* discusses the need to create balance in the four aspects of human development (spiritual, emotional, physical, and mental) in order to create successful learning environments. Finally, *Non-Aboriginal Teachers as Allies* looks at the opportunities to create connections in the classroom between Western ideologies and Aboriginal knowledge.

These five sub-headings all inform my main research topic which is: How do I incorporate aboriginal cultural understandings in my practice to improve how I support students with learning disabilities?

**Current State of Aboriginal Education**

The need to focus on aboriginal education is a dire one in Canada. Statistics Canada (2011) states that aboriginal people are the fastest growing demographic in Canada, with 46% of the population under the age of 25. Levin (2009) states that “in 2006 nearly 40% of Aboriginal people in Canada had not completed secondary school, compared with just over 20% of the total population. Further:
Many of the [on reserve] communities continue to suffer from poor housing, lack of fresh water, lack of infrastructure, lack of employment, and the associated problems of substance abuse and depression. Suicide rates among Aboriginal young people remain alarmingly high and, despite the progress in relationships, both active and passive discrimination against Aboriginal people continues to exist in Canada (Levin, 2009, p. 689).

From the outside, Canada looks as though it is one of the most welcoming, accepting and tolerant nations in the world. However, though it is “consistently rated as one of the top countries in the UN Human Development Index, Aboriginal peoples rank alongside citizens of Panama, Belarus, and Malaysia in terms of their social and economic prospects, and these gaps are not narrowing” (Macdonald, 2014, p. 66). This is due to the fact that “Canada has long promoted itself as a world trendsetter in multiculturalism” (Kymlicka, 2012). In reality:

Aboriginal people were on more tenuous ground, since they were governed by successive incarnations of the Indian Act, needed passes to leave their reserve communities, to sell produce or cattle, while many of their religious and cultural rights were curtailed. Many aboriginal children were forced to attend residential schools, while their parents could do very little to protest, since they did not have the right to assemble, to hire a lawyer or to vote...

Until 1960, Indian Affairs was located within the DCI (Citizenship and Immigration)” (Macdonald, 2014, p. 73).

All of these rules and regulations governed a specific demographic, while maintaining the façade of business as usual, in terms of multiculturalism for the rest of the nation.
This interpretation formally continued in the Multiculturalism Act of 1971, put forward by then-Prime Minister, Pierre Elliot Trudeau. In the House of Commons, he stated: “Although there are two official languages, there is no official culture” (Trudeau, 1971). Trudeau’s claim about a lack of “official culture ... perpetuated a myth of liberal equality in a settler colonial society still dominated by setter values and institutions” (MacDonald, 2014, p. 75). Aboriginal culture that existed on the land for time immemorial prior to European settlement was never acknowledged in this sentiment.

This is not to say that Canada is unique in its situation: these factors are remarkably similar across international boundaries and include parental experiences of systemic racism; historical and ongoing forms of state surveillance and intervention; a normative (non-indigenous) perspective of parenting and child rearing, and the multifaceted effects of poverty” (Gerlach et al, 2017, p. 1764). Indigenous peoples globally have been systematically targeted and historically disenfranchised from the dominant society since European discoveries and colonization of their lands.

Since the creation of residential schools, the Canadian government has had a strong role in Aboriginal education. Mills (2013) claims:

the state only began to relinquish some of its control over First Nations education in the 1970s, even though First Nations individuals and families had been resisting colonial education and particularly the use of residential schools for decades... From here, the federal government subsequently began transferring administrative control of local primary and secondary education to First Nations and Inuit authorities, phasing churches out of First Nations and Inuit education, and closing residential schools (p. 1302).
Thus began the first ownership aboriginal communities had over their formal education, again with little to no say over how authority would transfer hands.

By isolating and, therefore, excluding entire demographics by means of reservations, it can be said that Canada and the education system formed without any real input from First Nations groups. Battiste (2013) argues that a nation that is formed primarily in relation to that which it excludes, depends on the preservation of distinct boundaries and associated myths through systemic attempts such as the Indian Act in Canada in order to maintain a coherent self-identity (p. 652). Outdated and blatantly racist documents continue to dictate how the education system for aboriginal students is to be structured, regardless of how the rest of Canadian society and mainstream education has progressed without it.

On reserves, the responsibility for funding is split between the First Nations band and the federal government, including running on-reserve independent schools. “Schools on reserve are funded at per-student levels well below what most provinces pay to support their schools, even though the needs and costs on reserves are significantly higher” (Levin, p. 690). This, in turn, makes it that much more difficult to buy up-to-date technology for students in need, to hire and maintain a high-quality educational staff, and to keep up with the national average education that students attending school off reserve receive. Battiste (2013) claims that through “forced assimilation, English education, Eurocentric humanities and sciences, and living in a Eurocentric context complete with media, books, laws, and values” (p. 647). Eurocentrism then becomes the new normal, and refers to these processes as cognitive imperialism. By establishing a baseline that is already lower than the national average for First Nations students as soon as they enter mainstream public education, it seems improbable that they will be geared for the same fates and successes as their off-reserve counterparts.
Non-Aboriginal Educators Working with First Nations Students

Another major area to focus on is non-aboriginal teachers working with First Nations students. The main model for the Canadian education system came from Europe, along with most other cultural ideologies which left little room for acknowledgement or respect for Aboriginal culture. “European based culture has become the norm, with the majority of active and assertive Canadians in politics, the economy, education, and the arts coming from European backgrounds” (Macdonald, 2014, p. 70).

This traditionally left little room for external thinkers to create space within educational curriculum. Mills, et al (2013) states:

Teachers take on multiples roles as they are simultaneously required to provide individualized instruction to diverse students and be responsible to parents, community groups and administration, and are held accountable for children’s success through standardized curriculums and testing. Coinciding with the intensification of work, teaching has also undergone deskillling as teachers lose control over the design and delivery of curriculum” (p. 1310).

Often, the unknown can create a divide between educator and student. “Some teachers describe parents of Aboriginal students as less interested in education” (Riley, 2012, p. 316), and therefore, approach the students with preconceived notions. Deer (2013) notes that “in place of using questionable stereotypes on which class programming and interventions may be built, a more appreciative approach that requires teachers to “reveal and reaffirm positive development in children’s racial and [academic] identities.” Riley (2012) states that the attributes teachers communicate through behavioural cues or academic assessments can positively or negatively influence the attributional interpretations the students have of their academic potential” (p. 306). Placing stigma on a student can greatly affect how they react to their own education.
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Education has the potential to create new interpretations of the world and one another. Haig-Brown (2010) explains that “learning happens. When one encounters increasingly larger roadblocks to understanding and is open, even anxious to question fondly held assumptions; when one spends time paying particular attention to what people are saying to each other and to you, learning deepens” (p. 937). When working with others, it is crucial to note that how we act and react towards one another can influence relationships for the better or worse, depending how we approach the situation.

In Madden’s (2017) narrative study on 7 non-aboriginal teachers working with aboriginal students, she noted that “they rarely adapted an understanding of white privilege as resulting from, and enmeshed within, hundreds of years of institutional racism. A notion of power that is tethered to a sovereign subject and deployed through subjective control, rather than producing and (in part) produced by subjects” (p. 643). If educators cannot see the knowledge that they acquired as a Eurocentric, predominately male history, then it becomes increasingly more difficult to see why Aboriginal education does not find a lot of room within it. Current “school structures are fundamentally based on an antiquated system established in the late 1800s” (Jacobs, 2010, p. 1). This is not to say that progress has not been made in Aboriginal education since then, but the demographic trends indicate it is happening at a much slower rate than the national average. The 2004 Auditor General’s Report indicated that it would take approximately 28 years for the current educational divide between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people to close (Auditor General’s Report, 2004).

Finally, and arguably the most important point of non-aboriginal teachers working with aboriginal students is ensuring that their individual identity is being acknowledged. There are approximately 200,000 Indigenous people in British Columbia. There are 198 distinct First Nations in BC [with] more than 30 First Nations languages and close to 60 dialects (welcomebc.ca website). This means that “localizing educational programming to its fullest potential may require the empowerment of teachers to amend course subject matter as well as alter school climate in a manner that is congruent
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with the perceived values, ideals, and cultural mores of the local community” (Deer, 2013, p. 205).

Kovach (2009) notes that “Indigenous people have never been appreciative of a pan-Indigenous approach that attempts to homogenize our tribal practices” (p. 37).

This disconnect between perspectives may stem from lack of appropriate training in teacher’s college or professional development days. Deer (2013) notes that when it “came to [various teacher’s] knowledge of and experiences with Aboriginal culture, some of it was acquired in a manner that focused on a particular artefact (sic) or aspect of content and did not adequately cite or celebrate the respective people, community or culture with whom that artifact or aspect of content was associated. It was suggested that by focusing on an artefact or activity without addressing the human experience associated with it is an exercise in tokenistic pedagogy” (p. 186). Lack of awareness of individual tribe identity can, therefore, create fear and apprehension for non-aboriginal educators to want to pursue presenting Aboriginal culture to their students at all.

Different Ways of Knowing

Indigenous Knowledge fills the ethical and knowledge gaps in Eurocentric education, research and scholarship. By animating the voices and experiences of the cognitive “other” and integrating them into educational processes, it creates a new and balanced centre and a fresh vantage point from which to analyze Eurocentric education and its pedagogies (Battiste, 2002, p. 5).

It has long been the norm that education in Canada focused on the victorious, European male as they are the ones who generally got to dictate how history was to be written. However, there is now a shift in the way in which we are addressing and acknowledging marginalized members of society that have long been absent from history books.
Focusing on the concept of ethics ... propels leaders to reconsider the overpowering, unbalanced, influence of a Western hegemonic educational system where a governing group makes decisions based on the needs and desires of one dominant group. How does this Westernized educational hegemony infringe on the other group’s worldview and way of knowing and being? It is within this space that Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal peoples can begin to truthfully and respectfully speak to the predicaments, issues, and barriers that face them (Preston, 2016, p. 21).

When discussing education as a whole, we often fail to recognize that aboriginal students have a different experience in how they garner knowledge than other non-indigenous students. Zapotichna (2015) states that:

- the scholars and researchers of historical and pedagogical issues of native people in Canada claim that their languages were extremely rich and contained far more concepts and realis than any other languages in the world. Together with native traditions, customs, and folklore, language was the central means of educating younger generations over the centuries, the very means of self-identification and development of the nations until the European discovery of the continent (p. 102).

Preston (2016) notes that “an Aboriginal worldview is imbued with a sense of interconnectedness for all things, living and non-living... every aspect of nature is linked to every other aspect of nature in some way” (p. 17). As European settlement took effect across the continent, the disconnect from language and nature began to take hold among First Nation communities. Through means of dismantling and attempting to destroy aboriginal culture via reserves, residential schools and banning of cultural
ceremonies and traditions, knowledge that had been preserved, celebrated and passed down from
generation to generation was devastated.

The difference between the learning styles of Aboriginal learners and Western perspectives at a
fundamental level can create disparity.

Analysis from a western perspective breaks everything down to look at it. So
you are breaking it down into its smallest pieces and then looking at those small
pieces. And if we are saying that an Indigenous methodology includes all of
these relationships, if you are breaking down into their smallest pieces, you are
destroying all the relationships around it (Wilson, 2008, p. 119).

It is commonplace in Western culture to dismantle things to examine closer rather than from a
traditional Aboriginal approach to examine each piece as a part of the whole.

Education for Aboriginal peoples is to be viewed as a constant progress. “The concept that
education begins at birth and continues until death is aligned with the Aboriginal worldview that
education is a lifelong process, a journey of growth and enlightenment... the interrelated aspects of life’s
educational journey may be one way to appropriately reflect the holistic realms of education for
Aboriginal peoples” (Preston, 2016, p. 20). Learning, therefore, moves beyond what is obtained in
school, and is interconnected with every other aspect of being.

By merging together the different ways of knowing, aboriginal learners are then better capable
to openly learn. Cajete (2010) notes that “traditional Indian education is an expression of environmental
education par excellence. It is an environmental education process that can have a profound meaning
for the kind of modern education required to face the challenges of living in the world of the twenty-
first century” (p. 1128, italics in original). This ability to learn in various ways is often referred to as being
‘two-eyed.’ “As two-eyed seeing implies, people familiar with both knowledge systems can uniquely
combine the two in various ways to meet a challenge or task at hand” (Bartlett, 2012, p. 331).
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Four Aspects of Learning

Where formal Canadian mainstream education begins once the child begins preschool or kindergarten, aboriginal education starts at birth and goes well beyond the classroom walls. Knowledge traditionally comes from four main areas of the human spirit.

Studies have shown that the concept of traditional education was founded on the integrity of four aspects of a human development: spiritual, emotional, physical, and mental, each one of them being no more important than the others. Maintaining the balance among those four aspects was meant to contribute to the development and learning of a person” (Zapotichna, 2015, p. 100).

The four aspects of development help the student find balance and harmony within their own life. If one aspect is out of balance, all of them are, and need to be restored for inner harmony.

With this in mind, educators need to be aware that the journey of education for aboriginal learners has begun long before they walk through school doors. “Learning is regarded as a continuous process that begins from birth and continues through a person’s life. Both education and learning are focused on the process rather than the outcome of learning activities” (Zapotichna, 2015, p. 100). This is in direct contrast to grade-based learning that much of public school education is based on. It is pertinent to create meaningful education that is of use to the student as it contributes to aspects of their development.

In order to provide such education, a space needs to be created in which students feel safe and ready to learn. Preston (2016) states that “promoting high-quality lifelong education for Aboriginal people is about creating a trustful meaning space of mind, body, emotions and spirit” (p. 21, italics in original). When these are aligned, thoughtful and meaningful learning can occur. “The concept that
education begins at birth and continues until death is aligned with the Aboriginal worldview that education is a lifelong process, a journey of growth and enlightenment” (Preston, 2016, p. 16).

It is important to emphasize just how critical this balance can be to an Aboriginal student’s education. Preston (2016) states that “if one of these aspects is not tended to, the other three features are negatively affected; the circle becomes unbalanced, skewed and imperfect. For example, if a person is suffering from hunger and a lack of nutrition (physical), that person may feel short-tempered (emotional), be less able to think clearly (intellectual), and emit a lack of faith in life (spiritual)” (p. 16). Education, in all of its various forms, must therefore remain in a constant balance.

Non-Aboriginal Teachers as Allies

When looking to create a more inclusive education community, it should be noted that non-aboriginal teachers can be allies to bring aboriginal education into the mainstream educational system. “There is a profound requirement to establish new relationships founded in mutual recognition and respect that will forge a stronger and brighter future” (NationTalk, 2013). Snowball (2014) states that Aboriginal Education ought to be considered education for everyone, and that it should be initiated, developed, facilitated and evaluated by Aboriginal people.

What is Aboriginal Education without Aboriginal people being involved? This is akin to teaching about the forest from a classroom when the woods are visible just outside; we know the trees are there, but we do not engage them in order to enhance our understanding (p. 7).

By uniting as a collective, the progress between the two groups can help to promote inclusivity.

Traditionally, aboriginal education was left out of the public education system, leaving many teachers oblivious to the notion that it should be incorporated into Canadian education. Warry (2007) notes that “the issue goes much deeper than simply a lack of knowing however, as many Canadians are not only ignorant of Aboriginal cultures and histories, they are also ignorant of their ignorance” (p. 16).
Progress, amongst educators, has been made here. The Association of Canadian Deans of Education (ACDE) (2010) created an Accord that states all post-secondary training should be:

- providing opportunities within all teacher education programs for candidates to have authentic experiences in a variety of Indigenous learning settings... non-Aboriginal students, teacher candidates and graduate students [are] to explore and question their own sense of power and privilege (or lack thereof), within Canadian society as compared with others in that society (p. 7).

Although ‘authentic experiences’ may alter from university to university, it is promising that there is a recognition of the importance for non-aboriginal teachers being exposed to non-Aboriginal cultural content prior to beginning their careers as educators. Currently, there is no mandate for teachers already working in public schools, unless their individual districts take the initiative to offer workshops and training during professional development days.

It is important to note that aboriginal education is a fluid process that is ever changing. “Whether it is becoming complete, transforming or learning about one’s inner self, educators need to recognize that committing to Aboriginal Education is a complex and always evolving process. This is not to say that non-Aboriginal teachers must integrate these values and principles into their personal lives, but rather to acknowledge the enormity and importance of what it means to teach with and for, instead of about Aboriginal peoples” (Snowball, 2014, p. 56). By coming together and educating ourselves and students collectively, the gaps that exist between non-aboriginal educators and aboriginal students and community will begin to close.

There is an important responsibility for education systems to attend to the unique needs of aboriginal students. By focusing on the four aspects of learning, and helping support teachers who are unfamiliar with the culture, ways of knowing and aboriginal communities in which they work by means of professional development training or appropriate post-secondary support for teachers to become
capable allies within the school system. This study and its exploration, attempts to further build my knowledge on aboriginal cultural understandings through means of self-study.
Chapter 3: Research Methodology

This research study was conducted to discover how I can incorporate aboriginal cultural understandings in my practice to improve how I support students with learning disabilities. My research method is self-study to reflect on what I am doing as a teacher to help aboriginal students succeed in the public school system. By considering my own abilities and strengths as an educator, I can then examine how to include aboriginal cultural knowledge into my pedagogy to better support my fellow teachers, students and parents. Further developing understandings and bridging connections between cultures is how my vision of creating inclusive classrooms. This can only be done by being introspective and reflective of myself as an educator. “By developing an awareness of ourselves as learners (self-study) we can truly learn to see what we can be” (Senese, 2005, p. 54).

Theoretical Framework

Small shifts of awareness can become evident through the self-study process (Bass, 2005, p. 59). By appreciating, examining and focusing on what it is that educators bring to their practice there becomes a better understanding as to what is missing or can be altered to planning, teaching and further implementing as a teacher.

By taking my research question and inserting it within the methodology, I can then focus on the bigger picture. Tidwell (2005) states that “the essence of effective teaching centers on the idea of valuing the individual... [we are] constantly challenged to incorporate individual ways of knowing into the larger context of program curriculum” (p. 31). Self-study demands constant assessment and reevaluation of myself as an educator in order to ensure that progress is occurring.

“Self-study research is done using qualitative methods and, in particular, narrative and autobiographical methods, and is reported to others through a variety of media and forms of representation for the purposes of dissemination and critique” (Feldman, 2009, p. 36). The idea behind self-study is to always better the situation than how you found it. LaBoskey (2004) argues that “self-
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study is improvement aimed; interactive; employs multiple methods; and it is reported to the professional community for deliberation, testing and evaluation” (p. 35).

In recording my daily accounts, my experiences have become resources on which to reframe my beliefs and practices.

Self-study builds on the personal processes of reflection and inquiry, and takes these processes and makes them open to public critique. Self-study is not done in isolation, but rather requires collaboration for building new understandings through dialogue and validation of findings. Self-study research requires openness and vulnerability since the focus is on the self. And finally, self-study is designed to lead to the reframing and reconceptualizing of the role of the teacher (Samaras and Freese, 2009, p. 5).

It is important to ensure that self-study focuses on traditional research. “Self-study research must conform to the basic elements of research design. These steps include: articulating the research questions, gathering data, analyzing the data, and drawing conclusions. Like all research, the data gathering methods in self-study research must match the goals of the study” (Kosnik et al, 2009, p. 55).

Although there is fluidity in what the research question may be, the formula in how to gather and analyze the data is structured within the confines of the self-study methodology.

Data Interpretation

Data collection is crucial in taking ordinary, seemingly non-connected events, thoughts and ideas to find the bigger picture. Senese (2005) notes that what we perceive as shapeless or chaotic really contains patterns that we may not be able to see without the advantage of distance in location or time” (p. 53). By recording my daily and weekly thoughts and views, through journals, notes and my planner that patterns did start to arise.
Questioning one’s practice is a large part of self-study, but it is important to note that “our inquiries do not have to derive from problematic situations” (Samaras, 2009, p. 11). The main objective is to reveal larger educational goals through research. LaBoskey (2006) states “only in that way can the ideas be employed, applied, and re-tested by the teacher education community in ways that will help us embrace, discard, or transform those assertions; that is the essence of the validation process for the field” (p. 258).

Based on my journals, reflections and observations, I have reviewed the knowledge learned within my school, teaching community, and classroom. I tried to journal weekly, if not daily, over the past two years at my current job. Big ideas began to emerge and can be umbrellaed into larger themes suggesting ways to incorporate aboriginal ways of knowing into my classroom and school culture. My data will also look at my successes and failures in attempting to create inclusive education across all subjects. I feel as an educator, it is imperative to include both victories and struggles as it shows the humanity of (my)self in the self-study.

Value of the Study

Self-study research is important to the field of education in that it is honest and allows room for new meaning to come with the opportunity of being introspective. Feldman (2009) asks, “what does it mean to teach and to be a teacher? The importance of this question to my work is that it allows me to distinguish the act of teaching from being a teacher” (p. 38, italics in the original). When we start to reexamine something familiar, new opportunities can be formed. “By developing an awareness of ourselves as learners (self-study) we can truly learn to see what we can be” (Senese, 2005, p. 54).

In focusing on how I can incorporate different ways of knowing, I can then take these findings forward as a teacher promoting an inclusive classroom. It is important for all teachers to note that “self-study is a creative and meaningful method... it is an emergent and creative process, that change in practice necessarily integrates change in self, that self-study requires a collective, and that self-study’s
version of professional growth challenges the developmental model that implies that teachers improve simply with experience” (Bass, 2005, p. 59). By always checking in with our current school system and how we fit into it, we can always better ourselves as teachers and, in turn, create a better classroom climate to strengthen support and creativity for our students.

Self-study “doesn’t claim to know a truth but rather seeks to understand what is” (Lassonde, 2009, p. 8). In doing this, there is always room for growth in both professional abilities and the curriculum at large. For educators, “three purposes for practicing self-study are: 1) personal renewal, 2) professional renewal, and 3) program renewal (Samaras and Freese, 2009, p. 10). As time progresses, so too should an individual teacher’s craft as well as the programs we offer our students. In wanting to create inclusive classrooms, we can renew our ideologies and course curriculums to better represent the 21st century student.

My particular research focus, on how to include aboriginal ways of knowing within the classroom, may be of benefit to Canadian teachers from coast to coast. Although tribal knowledge is in large part localized, there are particular trends that can be used in order to have indigenous content within every classroom curriculum. Senese (2005) notes that often “what we perceive as shapeless or chaotic really contains patterns that we may not be able to see without the advantage of distance in location or time” (p. 53). The data themes and patterns emerging from within it may be transferable, in my opinion, to all Canadian classrooms of teachers willing to open up their content boundaries to include aboriginal knowledge within it.

The findings can be used as a tool for professional improvement in that the identified themes will contribute to bridging the gap between aboriginal culture and the mainstream public education system. “Self-study... is an obvious way of critiquing our current practice and making it better-genuine reform. Self-study, then, should be an effective way for teacher educators to be informed about their practice so that they can practice what they preach” (Myers, 2005, p. 131).
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It is here, in the potential for progress that true change can be brought forward. Then, LaBoskey (2006) adds “the ideas can be employed, applied, and re-tested by the teacher education community in ways that will help us embrace, discard, or transform those assertions; that is the essence of the validation process for the field” (p. 258). By looking into aboriginal cultural understandings and making connections as to how they can be included and incorporated into mainstream public education, we can begin to close the gap between aboriginal and non-aboriginal students and communities.

Limitations of the Study

One of the major hinderances in self-study is that it is based on bias and personal interpretation. “There is strong skepticism that self-study can make a useful contribution to the research literature because it is biased- it doesn’t have the traditional distance between researcher and researched” (Cochran-Smith, 2005, p. 221). Feldman (2009) further notes, “if the self becomes the subject of the self-study, then the dangers of misreading the data increase, and the self-study becomes what detractors of the methodology call “navel gazing” (p. 45). It will then be important for readers to know that this account is my interpretation of knowledge and appreciate that the findings may not ring true for all aboriginal communities.

Although the methodology of self-study may seem overly simple, honing in on what precisely to focus on can be a real struggle. “The researcher needs to identify exactly what it is to be studied. This process, although challenging at times, forces researchers to articulate and operationalize exactly what they want to learn” (Kosnik et al, 2009, p. 60). Deciding that the “right” questions are being asked is a major concern, especially when the researcher is attempting to learn how to incorporate cultural knowledge in a respectful and honest manner.
Chapter Four: Findings

Throughout my self-study, my research focus and question has remained constant: how do I incorporate aboriginal cultural understandings in my practice to improve how I support students with learning disabilities?

With this overarching question in mind, I was searching for themes that arose that gave insight into how to close the gap between mainstream curriculum and aboriginal students within the classroom. I documented my data within my journal and daily records, focusing on guiding questions to hone in on my thesis topic. My main guiding questions for my journaling were:

- What is my school culture and community?
- How do I measure achievement and inclusive learning?
- What does inclusivity look like?
- How do I use data and experiences that do not belong to me within my classroom?
- What can I do to encourage and promote culture in my classroom? What does that look like?

Throughout my journaling process and data collection, larger themes began to emerge, mainly: identity and perspective, educational practice, and learner-centred practice. Within these grander themes, I found aspects of my thesis question could be examined and answered to some degree.

In keeping with the boundaries of self-study, I focused on how to generate knowledge beyond my own experience and how to include it within my classroom. This, at times, could be challenging as data collected from lived cultural experiences do not belong to me, and need to be honoured with discretionary, non-descriptive respect. In these times, I returned to my thesis topic and asked myself what my goals and intentions were to take the experience forward into helping further promote an inclusive classroom setting.
Identity and Perspective

Arguably, the most critical component I found to ensure that students learn is by making sure they feel seen and heard. Two of the First Peoples Principles of Learning are that “learning is embedded in memory, history, and story” and that “learning requires exploration of one’s identity” (FNESC, 2014). This means close contact, consideration and input from both the students and their families. Since its conception, the Canadian education system has done little to include First Nations people in its design or implementation. Beyond this, it has done little to embrace different ways of knowing which, as previously mentioned, is critical to acknowledging and respecting one’s identity. “The mainstream educational practices within public schools commonly promote learning through a focus on intellect, competitiveness, individuality, status projection, and outside judgement” (Preston, 2013, p. 274). This style of education leaves little room for exploration of one’s identity or personal experience.

Educators have to acknowledge that all individuals bring different ideologies and prior knowledge to our classrooms. This can and will change yearly, daily and oftentimes, within a single lesson. Saunders et al (2007) notes that teachers should be mindful of the 3Rs of First Nations culture: including the area of respect (for the individual and for differences), relevance (of content to the learner and life), and reciprocative learning (the partnership of learning with and from each other)” (p. 1026). As a teacher of Aboriginal students, in order to ensure that their identities were being respected and brought out in their learning, I had to be continuously mindful of how culture effects their classroom experience.

For example, when reading a First Nations story, I was cognizant that how stories are approached is different between mainstream education and aboriginal teachings. English language arts asks us to focus on themes, big ideas and how to dissect a story; conversely, First Nations culture asks that we take the story as is, don’t piecemeal it, and to learn from it as a collective. After one such reading, I noted, “all stories are teachings. There is always some lesson to be learned, big or small. Don’t
take that lesson as a piece, take it as a whole” (November 20, 2017). By deconstructing a narrative, I may be missing the other components that make the story what it is. The same could be said about student identity: I must be aware and mindful of every part of their identity, not just the pieces I am trying to bring out in order to meet ministry standards.

My practice as a teacher should shift and expand to make room for individual perspectives to be emphasized within the classroom. In doing so, I can also expand my growing interest in learning how to acquire knowledge through the lens of another culture, which has always been a passion of mine. By exposing myself to different ways of knowing, my own personal identity, and therefore my practice, would develop into something broader than the Eurocentric, colonial ideologies I spend my energy and time trying to stride against.

The only way I could see fit to allow students to explore their identity through education was by including them in the creation of their learning. I did this through various projects, one example being “The Invisible Pioneer” project for my Social Studies 10 class (Appendix 1). Here, I asked students to choose First Nations from around the province, and describe their contributions to helping settle the land, that is often ignored or overlooked in Social Studies textbooks. Recognizing that efforts were made from various groups, other minorities included, allows room for other voices to be heard. Appreciating the important roles that ancestors had in establishing the province helped tie identity into the course. I noted that “it is important for me that my students find their value and worth in our world at large... it is here that they can learn to be contributing adults who understand their self-worth because it often goes unrecognized” (Sharratt, February 28, 2018). I was nervous that, because the textbooks lack the appropriate acknowledgement and respect of the efforts made by minorities, my students would not be able to find themselves within the historical narrative and not desire to learn further about how the world that we live in came to be. This is where I found myself heavily relying on my school culture and community to help me better represent my local First Nations students.
As a teacher at a band school, I want to ensure that the lessons I am teaching are pertinent to my students. “I want to read something that they can reflect on when they’re with their elders or learn something about the land that they walk on, their land and the land of their ancestors, that they can make connections to. I want them to take these lessons out to the world and bring them back into my classroom somehow transformed into something else entirely unique to them and to our classroom experience” (Sharratt, December 5, 2018). This will speak to my practice as much as it does to their personal perspectives in that thoughtful reflection is an experiential lesson I hope to have helped create in and of itself.

I appreciate the fear that comes along with misrepresenting, misappropriating or conflicting identities when dealing with First Nations identity, as it is so specific to each individual nation. I found that, especially with prescribed literary material, terminology, and ideologies are blanketed to represent all First Nations when, in fact, many terms or ideas are not and were never used, in particular regions of the country. The trickster, for example, was not used in many parts of Canada, or is represented by various creatures or names. By blending all of the versions together, it can take away from the moral or character of the story itself. I wrote in my journal that “the differences we notice, students notice too… By avoiding these gaps we are further perpetuating the idea of the “other”, rather than creating bridges. I don’t want to shy away from information and history because it is dark or messy, I want to create a classroom where we can take that darkness and learn something from it so that history DOESN’T repeat itself” (Sharratt, February 14, 2018).

It is important for me, as an educator, to face these mistruths or inexactitudes with honesty and clarity, to the best of my abilities. The British Columbia Ministry of Education’s resource booklet recommends that “when correcting inaccurate half-truths and generalizations, focus the correction on the ideas, not on the students who may have been misled into believing and expressing them” (Aboriginal Worldviews and Perspectives in the Classroom, 2015, p. 18). By learning more honest
versions and past realities, we can show the humanity in our ways, and discuss how it brings us to our collective present. In showing that I don’t have all the answers, I hope to express my awareness that my personal identity shapes how the classroom setting is structured. It is imperative for me that students understand that I challenge, shift and change my perspective on what my identity as a Canadian and citizen of the world is. For certain, our national history is messy, confusing and often misguided, and I hope to promote an environment for discussion, vulnerability and truth and for my students to further understand their own identities within the classroom and beyond.

Luckily, there is usually a wealth of local stories that can be accessed, if time is taken to research them. I learned to ask elders, resident historians, colleagues and even my students if they know of any local stories, and there were always plenty. Here, it is important to note, that stories are always acknowledged as borrowed and we are not to be the keepers of them. I wrote that “I need to remember to always ask permission to share what I have been told or have read, and that I should probably only read documented stories so that I can share them to the best of my ability” (November 22, 2017). As much as there is a desire to represent identity in the classroom, it also needs to be done so in an authentic way and with permission; this may not always be given and that needs to be respected as well.

I have come to understand that identity is critically important to acknowledge in creating an inclusive classroom because even though we have different ways of knowing we still need to embrace the four ways of knowing: spiritual, emotional, physical and mental. Without these key components, the balance of learning is off and can hinder student progress. In bringing these ways of knowing to the forefront and being together in the classroom environment, my practice can continuously shift as I learn how to create learning for students that leaves room for the process of finding their individual identities.
Educational Practice

In order for change to occur within the classroom, it is evident that educators need to change the way they teach. The traditional education system was created to focus on Eurocentric histories and ways of knowing leaving little room for other perspectives to be considered or included. This leaves little room for my thesis question of: How do I incorporate aboriginal cultural understandings in my practice to improve how I support students with learning disabilities? This meant I needed to change the way I teach.

Teachers who were trained in British Columbia in my graduating year of 2010 and older, were not required to take any First Nations Studies courses, or include any First Nations content within their teacher education training. Furthermore, districts are still not mandated by the provincial or federal governments to offer First Nations courses such as First Nations Studies (FNS) 12 or English First Peoples (EFP) 10-12, as of yet. However, this shift is slowly occurring and becoming more noticeable around the province. The British Columbia Ministry of Education’s resource booklet notes:

In any community, whether Aboriginal or non-Aboriginal, the teacher has an important role in guiding student learning, skill acquisition, and achievement. In the context of Canada’s new commitment to truth and reconciliation with Aboriginal peoples, however, the teacher has an important additional role in contributing to truth, reconciliation and healing. Where schools are situated within or near Aboriginal communities, teachers have an important role to play in contributing to the social wellbeing and cultural vitality of the community. As well, teachers have an important role to play by educating all of society about the place of First Peoples within the Canadian mosaic and the importance of redressing the historical damage done to Aboriginal communities” (Aboriginal Worldviews and Perspectives in the Classroom, 2015, p. 30).
In order for educators to properly be able to support Aboriginal ways of knowing and traditional pedagogies, they need to be offered suitable professional development workshops to help further develop and strengthen their knowledge of local indigenous peoples. My school and administration fortunately support me in many educational endeavours such as EFP training, and residential school workshops that train teachers how to address the subject to students as early as grade 5.

The new EFP 10-12 curriculum allows great room for the teacher to use local sources and materials; this felt overwhelming at first as it is difficult to know where to start. The difference from English 10-12 courses and EFP 10-12 courses, according to the English First Peoples 10-12 Teacher Resource Guide (2018) are that they:

- are based entirely on the study of “texts” representing authentic First Peoples voices (“texts” is here understood to refer to oral, audio, visual, cinematic, and digital media works as well as written works)
- incorporate First Peoples principles of learning in the curriculum content and espouse their application in the teaching of the course
- place increased emphasis on the study and command of oral language and on First Peoples’ oral traditions
- recognize the value of First Peoples’ worldviews, and the importance of culture in language and communication
- promote teaching the curriculum through a focus on themes, issues, and topics important to First peoples (p. 7-8)

Keeping these key elements in mind can be overwhelming as I was starting with little to no knowledge in some of these areas. These materials demanded I rise to the occasion of examining other worldviews and voices and connecting that knowledge with my current pedagogy and practice.
One of the more harrowing, disheartening yet powerful workshops I attended was the Indian Residential Schools and Reconciliation teachers’ workshop. Within it, resources for grades 5, 10, and 11-12 were given with rationale and how to plan for instruction. As I find this topic difficult to know where to begin, it was helpful to read: in presenting these issues, teachers are not expected to be experts on the history and legacies of Indian Residential School. Rather their role is as guides and facilitators” (Indian Residential Schools and Reconciliation Teacher Resource Guide, 11-12, 2015, p. 6). In order to have a truly inclusive classroom, I feel it is important to discuss issues that are unjust and have open dialogue about reconciliation and how to move forward.

Other significant workshops I have been fortunate to participate in are local language sessions to learn basic greetings and phrases with fluent speakers, and learning from elders within the school on a daily basis. Because language needs to be practiced consistently, and First Nations languages specifically have historically focused on oral knowledge, these workshops were invaluable for me as a learner to begin to speak words on land in which they were created. It is powerful to experience language where it originated and to learn from those who carry that knowledge.

With the changing focus on curriculum in British Columbia starting to include aboriginal knowledge and histories, we need to reconcile the damage that was done in the past. Chair of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, Justice Murray Sinclair stated, “education brought us here, education will help get us away from this” (Report to Senate Committee, 2013). By acknowledging the extreme injustices of the past, and the ripple effects it still has in classrooms and communities today, I can demonstrate recognition of the fact that we need collaboration and input from local community members to make education inclusive and whole.

The input from family is critical to the success of students, in understanding their upbringing to the point where they enter my classroom. Bergeson et al (2000) states:
There is often a discontinuity between the culture and language of First Nations students’ homes and communities and that of the school. It is believed that these discontinuities often result in systematic and recurrent miscommunication in the classroom, as well as failure to acknowledge and build upon knowledge these students bring with them to school (p. 13).

It has taken me years of relationship building within the community, attending open houses, hosting lunches for families to come see what our school environment is like, and being invited to cultural events and ceremonies to fully appreciate the way culture and family is so engrained into First Nations students lives and that their educational experiences come from what they deem valuable. Learning needs to be meaningful and I have to work to make connections to other elements of their lives, and work towards acknowledging their other ways of knowing.

It is important to learn student’s interests in order to gauge how best to steer the class. From this, freedom and opportunity to create meaningful work will begin to develop. I use local stories and histories daily so that connections can be made in various ways, like being able to picture a place, knowing the story or storyteller, or understanding parallels in teachings.

Practical life skills, like differentiating between formal and informal narrative are an everyday lesson for my students. Making connections with the local history and the provincial and federal governments and what their historical relations have looked like is another important aspect of my social studies teachings. It is critical for me that my students find their narrative and feel immersed within their own education.

After speaking with an elder about kindness and how to inclusion, I wrote:

I learned a local word today that roughly means “respect to all”, and the power that it holds to the present and the past. Respect to what was, respect to what is, and respect to what will be. We need to be aware of this respect, how it was
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missing in years gone by and how we must give “respect to all” in the future (Sharratt, January 29, 2018).

I had always appreciated the fact that I felt I respected all my students but had not continuously made the connection of the histories and familial ties where there was not that same level of respect given to students. Regardless of the efforts I have made, it is important for me to reflect on the histories of colonial education and the long-lasting damage that was done when respect was not given.

Continuous learning for myself as a teacher seems to be commonplace within my educational practice. In doing this, I need to stay up-to-date with curriculum options, such as new texts, and materials that may be of interest or of use to my students. I have come to understand that I, myself as an educator, need to also be ready to be a student and willing and open to trying new experiences and learning new, non-Eurocentric ideologies and practices in order to further my journey into creating an inclusive classroom.

Learner-Centred Practice

My thesis question seemed the most obvious and answered within this theme. Again, how do I incorporate aboriginal cultural understandings in my practice to improve how I support students with learning disabilities? Here, I felt what I most needed to focus on was to connect what I don’t know with what I do.

Since I am a high school English and Social Studies teacher that is fortunate enough to work within a welcoming school community, I know that there are avenues I can access to help me fill in the gaps, so-to-speak. The new EFP curriculum puts the onus on the teacher to find local stories and teachings and, when possible, invite local elders in to the classroom. We are blessed to have elders in residence on a regular basis and, I learned it to be customary, to allow the elders to share their wisdom and experience whenever they feel fit within the classroom. Once, after an elder discussed Remembrance Day and its significance, I wrote:
It is important to have the awkward conversations. From there, we tear down the walls of fear, uncertainty, and the unknown. We need to teach students to give back to themselves, their community and to the planet. If we only show them the power that they hold within themselves, that might be lesson enough (Sharratt, November 9, 2017).

This is the second First Nations tribe school that I have worked at and have noticed that even though they are geographically very close to one another, the school and community culture is extremely different. For example, even though their languages are technically labelled as the same, the influx in how you pronounce certain words can mean different things. This has led to confusion and, often humourous times, when attempting to speak new words with my students; it also allows room for me to listen respectfully and for my students to become the teachers of their own culture. It shows the importance for me to remember “to acknowledge that this tribe, and all tribes, no matter how close, are different. They are different in their experiences, in their teachings, and in their culture. I need to make sure when I teach that I reflect this acknowledgement and respect to my students” (Sharratt, May 1, 2017). As much as I want to respect that individuality of my students, I need to remember that we are all part of a larger collective and both need to be treated with dignity and reverence.

Learner-centred practice relies heavily on the experiential learning process of the student. The British Columbia Ministry of Education’s resource booklet states:

In addition to knowing their students as individuals and configuring instruction to connect with their interests and build on their strengths, teachers who espouse a learner-centred approach typically adopt an outlook characterized by:

- A willingness to see themselves as facilitators of students’ learning rather than autonomous classroom managers
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- A focus on “setting the bar even higher” with respect to what students can do rather than on why they cannot do yet (i.e., a deficit focus)
- An emphasis on promoting student self-regulation and student initiative with respect to their own learning (age-appropriate)
- The ability to nurture reflective learning (including the use of student-generated criteria for assessment) (Aboriginal Worldviews and Perspectives in the Classroom, 2015, p. 48).

Students need to be given the space to share what knowledge they know in many different capacities with various outlets and mediums. I do this in many ways. I strive not to use outdated resources. As literature and historical perspective change constantly, I feel 20th century and older textbooks lack awareness and modernity to keep up with the times. Instead, I opt for place-based learning, to make it tangible and relevant to my students. We will go outdoors whenever possible, bring in local resources, whether that be people, stories, food or artefacts, and make learning the primary objective and experience.

Making connections with family is important to learning-centred practice. Because of historical wrongdoings towards First Nations peoples from the traditional education system, the relationships may be fragile, damaged or broken. One parent asked that I “include them in the story” (Sharratt, February 6, 2017), and that really stood out to me. Instead of assuming how events and wrongdoings have shaped a group of people, it is pertinent to inclusive education that we begin to share the narrative. In this, I mean to decolonize the material by acknowledging that these students and peoples are not a thing of the past, but current and modern members of society who have much to contribute to their education.

When focusing on learner-centred practice, it is important for me to remember that, at times, protocols may take precedence over classroom time. Winter months, which can take students away for cultural events, demand a level of flexibility when scheduling school events such as projects or tests,
whenever possible. I wrote that “learning needs to be pertinent to [my student’s] being” when I had a major drop in attendance, due to cultural events (Sharratt, December 4, 2017). This meant rescheduling tests before/after school, or finding alternative criteria for projects and assignments that still showed learning was taking place. Once comfortable, I also found that my students were willing to share their experiences through their writing and discussing it openly within their school assignments.

I have come to understand that I need to be pushing my students to continuously try their best and to help them use all of their ways of knowing through every facet of their work, for me, namely through their writings and historical connections. When students start seeing themselves within their learning and their work, I find they take more responsibility and ownership of it; they start critiquing it and finding ways to improve it, again whether it’s through making their personal writing stronger or building confidence and appreciation in how to better understand one another. When their learning matters, they show up, are present and are often excited to learn more.

**Overview of Findings**

My findings seemed to connect to different aspects of my thesis question: How do I incorporate aboriginal cultural understandings in my practice to improve how I support students with learning disabilities? All three themes, namely identity and perspective, educational practice and learner-centred practice, show the way that I was able to establish cultural connections beyond my own and must continue to do so, as I think the inquiry of self-study and reflection should be commonplace for educators.

Through identity and perspective, we simultaneously learn more about who we are while connecting it with what we already know. I have found that, to establish an inclusive classroom, I must make the content and experience of learning meaningful for my students.

This can be ensuring that each individual student’s identity is being brought out while connecting it to the material of the course. A large part of identity is respect: garnering it, fostering it
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and allowing room for it to be reciprocal. For me, this means making connections within the community and the local materials and resources on hand.

My practice as a teacher asked of me to shift my identity as the sole facilitator of the classroom, and to expand for new perspectives and ideologies. This required a great deal of learning and reflection on my part. I had to find the Eurocentric, colonial teachings of my own practice and deconstruct them into a blended interpretation of a modern 21st century classroom within the context of my local indigenous students and community. Doing this took time, energy, patience and understanding because while I must meet ministry mandates, I also must appreciate and support Aboriginal ways of knowing and traditional pedagogies that are rooted in my student’s identities.

The theme of educational practice helped me hone in on what it meant to me to have an inclusive classroom. Reflecting and examining my practice as a teacher required that I look at what I was doing and what I may be missing within my lessons that have major effects on inclusive classrooms.

I had to make sure I had the right tools in the toolbox, so-to-speak, to even approach the content I was teaching, if I wanted the learning environment to be authentic. I attended workshops on aboriginal language and narratives, I studied the historical impact of residential schools and, when appropriate and invited, I immersed myself in local knowledge, teachings and ceremonies to better round out my knowledge of local indigenous ideologies.

It took effort on my part to begin to process the importance of looking at what is taught in the classroom from another angle. This effort will continue to progress as it is important for me to stay current with curriculum changes and new aboriginal materials and resources that are thankfully becoming more and more accessible every day.

With this effort to shift my pedagogy to create room for inclusion, it is important to keep the importance of respect at the forefront of my work. It is a balancing act to remember that though some knowledge may be interesting and useful to my subjects and the classes I teach, it may not be mine to
share. Respect needs to be constantly given and acknowledged throughout my practice if a truly inclusive classroom is to prevail.

Finally, the theme of learner-centred practice seemed to answer my question about inclusivity in the classroom because it demands it. My task here is to encourage reflective learning and to allow students to connect and build on their own individual interests and strengths; this is possible for all students regardless of ability.

Because every First Nation tribe is different from the next, they need to be acknowledged and respected as such. It is important to recognize that cultural protocols will often take precedence to my classes, and that flexibility is key in ensuring that my students return to school. If I can make cultural connections between school work and their individual lives, then I should. I found when I raised the bar of expectations, while also making the content relatable and giving the students ownership over their own educational experience, they felt included in the classroom and, in turn, were willing to more actively participate in their learning.

Though identity is what we already bring to our given perspectives, my educational practice and creating a learner-centred environment is something that will continuously evolve over time. All three, when combined, help to answer my thesis question, which is: how do I incorporate aboriginal cultural understandings in my practice to improve how I support students with learning disabilities? This is certainly a journey that has no ending and will remain with me throughout my career and, hopefully progress beyond what I have learned thus far.
Chapter Five: Conclusion

In focusing on my thesis question: ‘How do I incorporate aboriginal cultural understandings in my practice to improve how I support students with learning disabilities?’ I hoped to create the most inclusive classroom I possibly could. What that meant and what that looked like has been ever evolving throughout my career as a teacher. This led me to a self-study where I examined my classroom and practice through journaling and data collection, where the larger themes of identity and perspective, educational practice and learner-centred practice emerged.

Knowing that one of the most recent statistics averaged that four out of every ten Aboriginal students did not graduate, did not sit well with me. Also knowing that on-reserve band schools were funded differently and at a lower rate than provincially funded public schools, it seemed yet another version of separatism between First Nations students and non-aboriginal students. Though the funding may come from separate jurisdictions, the baseline from where to start needs to change.

Non-aboriginal teachers may go beyond the standard curriculum which, due to funding and lack of teacher service training, has somewhat instilled a system of complacency and a business-as-usual education philosophy. There is a need for teachers to familiarize and educate themselves on the traditional land they teach on and acknowledge the indigenous peoples that continue to inhabit it.

It has been commented that many teachers find First Nations parents distant or uninterested in their children’s education. After examining decades of residential school students’ histories, this does not seem inappropriate or unjustified. Stereotypes about racial academic abilities have created a biased school system which places fear on the unknown. By continuing to not represent or revere First Nations identity and contributions within the curriculum, whether by omission, purposefully or not, students will continue to struggle to find their value and place within the classroom. This simply cannot continue to occur.
Since it is not yet mandated by the provincial or federal governments, nor individual school districts to include First Nations content or courses within their schools, it is recommended from the literature and based on my research, that teachers need to take it upon themselves to learn indigenous studies and issues, and to include it within their regular, daily instruction. Knowledge solely from a “Eurocentric, predominately male history” can no longer be the norm in a 21st century classroom (Madden, 2017, p. 643). Educational practice requires that educators also commit to lifelong learning themselves. This can be done in various capacities: attend language workshops, invite aboriginal speakers into the classroom, make contact with local aboriginal historians, allow room for other ways of knowing to count for valid means of assessment.

In order to access quality training like this, this study recommends that teachers need to turn to their principals, administrators, and if needed, districts to ensure that opportunities are created to do so. School culture needs to shift to focus on policies and procedures that promote different ways of knowing. After spending time thinking about what an inclusive classroom looks like in terms of aboriginal cultural understandings I wrote, “I don’t want to segregate or differentiate. I want inclusion with mainstream classrooms... although I may never have full immersion abilities, I would still rather acknowledge my gifts and strengths, and my students’ gifts and strengths, rather than our limitations” (February 6, 2018). By understanding where mine and my school’s collective baseline was, it became possible to know where we need to go next, and collaborate to find ways to get there.

I have discussed how the conflict between cultural protocol and school curriculum may clash throughout the school year and both Deer (2013) and Kovach (2009) agree that local education should be included as an appropriate assessment tool for learning. When we appreciate and include different ways of knowing as a part of the curriculum and give it value and sustenance, then we begin to create inclusivity.
The Four Aspects of Learning focus on the: spiritual, emotional, physical and mental. It only makes sense that educators focus on the overall wellbeing of our students, beyond solely focusing on the academic outcomes. In aboriginal culture, learning is “regarded as a continuous process that begins from birth and continues through a person’s life” (Zapotichna, 2015, p. 100). I found this most blatant when examining how I allow for a learner-centred practice approach in my teaching. By finding ways to learn while allowing room for students’ tangible selves, their ancestral selves and their investigative selves to cohabitate within their studies, amazing progress and results can occur.

The British Columbia Ministry of Education calls on teachers to see themselves as facilitators rather than autonomous classroom managers, meaning we need to promote student initiative and ingenuity, while simultaneously raising the bar of expectations of future possibilities. If we ever pigeonhole students, even inadvertently, we can create a self-fulfilling prophecy where students stop looking to bigger goals or dreams for themselves.

Statistics Canada puts aboriginal people as the fastest growing demographic in the country and it benefits the entire nation to see its citizens prosper. All children should be given equal opportunity to succeed and the chance to strive for goals that may not have been accessible to them in years past, or to their families before them.

Throughout the process of self-study, and continuing to examine my practice as an educator, I have constantly viewed my research through the lens of asking my thesis question: how do I incorporate aboriginal cultural understandings in my practice to improve how I support students with learning disabilities? I have come to believe that inclusion, in all its forms, and lifelong learning for both my students and myself as an educator, is a journey that has no ending. The Four Aspects of Learning and the willingness to learn from birth to death, in all capacities, should be a goal for all educators to strive for and hopefully achieve.
Incorporating Aboriginal Understandings

References


Incorporating Aboriginal Understandings


NationTalk (2013). “Assembly of First Nations national Chief cites action on education as key to reconciliation: ‘First Nation control of First Nation education must be our shared goal’”. Available at www.nationtalk.ca


https://www.welcomebc.ca/Choose-B-C/Explore-British-Columbia/B-C-First-Nations-Aboriginal-People


The Invisible Pioneer Project

**Step 1:** Choose a person from a marginalized group that you would like to research: woman, African Canadian, First Nation person, Irish or Eastern European.

**Step 2:** Decide whether you will assume the role of that person, or if you will be the historian researching that particular person, and life as it was in Canada during the early 19th century.

**Step 3**

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<tr>
<td>- 5 journal entries, 200 words each (Discuss your daily life, work, family, hopes, fears, accomplishments, contributions, reasons why you emigrated, etc). <strong>FACTS &amp; DETAILS OF AUTHENTIC EXPERIENCE IS CRUCIAL!!!</strong></td>
<td>- Paper describing the life experience of a particular person/group in 19th century Canada, 800 words. (Include details of daily life, employment, family structure, accomplishments, contributions, reasons why they emigrated, etc).</td>
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<td>- 5 pictures with a short description of what it is of (i.e. photo album).</td>
<td>- 5 pictures with a short description of what it is of (i.e. how it relates to your person/group).</td>
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<td>- 5 artefacts with a short paragraph description of why they are important to your survival as a Canadian pioneer.</td>
<td>- 5 artefacts with a short paragraph description on your conclusions of how they influenced that particular person/group.</td>
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**Marks**

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<td>- 4 marks per journal entry (20 marks).</td>
<td>- 20 marks for your paper.</td>
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*Either project can be presented in the form of: a booklet, poster board, power point, essay, or another medium you see fit (run it by me first 😊).*