Honouring Our Stories: Aboriginal Primary Students Sense of Belonging in Public School Classrooms

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Abstract

Aboriginal students’ graduation rates are not at par with their non Aboriginal peers in the public school system. This research is an inquiry into the effects of talking circles grounded in the traditional values of listening, mutual respect, speaking from the heart and kindness and cooperation on Aboriginal primary students’ self esteem in a public school Aboriginal Primary Program. A qualitative study was conducted using traditional talking circles honouring students’ and parents’ stories in discussing the effects of talking circles on the children’s self esteem in learning. The four major themes spoken in transcription of the stories were that the talking circles provide a safe environment for students to speak their feelings in conflict resolution, the students feel listened to, respected, honoured and recognized in learning, the students feel a sense of belonging, confidence and pride in learning about their culture and the students become stronger learners, parents become better parents and the talking circles support community building. Results suggest a need for talking circles in all classrooms in public schools and leadership in this direction has begun as a result of this inquiry.
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I have to share my numerous experiences of reading and re-reading this thesis in trying
to find some kind of balance between relating the research information from both a Eurocentric
and an Aboriginal lens. I walk in both worlds now (well stumble really), but for half of my life I
chose not to be identified as having any Aboriginal ancestry. I am learning to listen to my truth,
what I know to be the good way, what I have always known. I have so much more to learn. What
I do know is I need to include both worldviews in my writing as a reflection of my lived
experiences. This is why my work reads of two voices.
Chapter One: Introduction

This poem by Arthur Solomon, an Anishnawbe spiritual teacher, is entitled “Education.”

This is the story it tells:

The traditional way of education
was by example and experience
and by storytelling.
The first principle involved was total respect
and acceptance of the one to be taught.
And that learning was a continuous process
from birth to death.
It was a total continuity without interruption.
Its nature was like a fountain
that gives many colours and flavours of water
and that whoever chose could drink as much or as little
as they wanted to and whenever they wished.
The teaching strictly adhered
to the sacredness of life whether of human
or animals or plants.
But in the course of history there came a disruption.
And then the education became “compulsory miseducation”
for another purpose, and the circle of life was broken
and the continuity was ended.
It is that continuity which is now taken
up again in the spiritual rebirth
of the people.
(Solomon, 1991, p. 79).

In my experience of working with Aboriginal students of all grade levels in the past twenty or more years, the students who felt good about who they were and where they were from had the most positive outlooks and seemed to be the students who would take the most risks in their learning. I can recall my own experiences in a public school as an adopted Aboriginal child coming from an abusive, violent non-Aboriginal home. I remember trying desperately to
figure out what the teacher wanted me to do in my Kindergarten class. When I couldn’t achieve the desired cut out wheel shape with scissors and construction paper I received a glancing blow to my hand and harsh words screamed in my face. I suddenly fell ill with a sore tummy and decided at the ripe age of five that school was painful and I was not good enough. In Grade One, I was caught daydreaming, looking out the window instead of moving my red counters across my desk into sets. Once again a different teacher yelled in my face and pulled my bangs so hard I cried. The teacher did not know why I was looking out the window, why I was dreaming of floating in the fluff of the clouds. She never looked at me; never saw my sad brown eyes purple and swollen from crying all night. She did not know of the night time assaults that had begun every time my parents left the house. All she saw was a disobedient child who had not followed her directions.

How many students come to school already traumatized only to learn that what matters is doing what the teacher wants regardless of their emotional, cognitive, physical and spiritual learning needs? How many students know that their teacher cares about their feelings as a learner? How many teachers ask, “What do you need?”

The purpose of this study was to examine how effective an Aboriginal Primary Program is at improving Aboriginal primary students’ self-esteem in the first years of their public schooling. The program was developed and implemented by the researcher of this study in September 2004 and has been running for eight years. In contemplating accepting this teaching
assignment I searched deep within my own experiences as a light brown child attending elementary school in an entirely non-Aboriginal population.

I so clearly remember when the new girl who spoke Mandarin came to my school as she was the only other child of colour and surely to be my immediate friend. I was so thankful to have the attention deflected from me; no more off-setting questions, “What are you anyway?” I decided at a very young age to quietly disappear in the classroom and simply do what was needed as to not draw attention to myself. I was not engaged in learning, I was engaged in finding the quickest route out of school, and I did!

Subsequently, I accepted the challenge in School District 71 and was compelled to develop a program that supported students in developing a positive sense of self and cultivate a love for lifelong learning. Positive self esteem is essential for all students to feel successful in life never mind the classroom (Ma, 2003). Balance between culture and mainstream learning is achieved when traditional knowledge and values are incorporated into the education of Aboriginal students. When this occurs, the silenced Aboriginal voice can be lifted (Antone, 2000).

It has been such a struggle trying to find my own voice in writing this narrative. I was schooled in the public system and never experienced any Aboriginal cultural practices or respectfully presented Aboriginal curriculum other than being in the table group named the ‘Haidas’ in Grade 4. I think we may have seen a few older reference books with antiquated pictures of dark skinned people with little clothing on, war paint and headdresses. I felt
embarrassed and hoped that no one would look in my direction for surely they would know my birth father was half Indian.

Aboriginal students’ graduation rates in the province of British Columbia were 49% in 2009 as compared to their non-Aboriginal counterparts at 79% (The Canadian Press, 2009). Aboriginal educators not only in the province of British Columbia but Canada wide are determined to increase these rates. British Columbia’s Grade 4 Foundational Skills Assessment tests in reading, writing and mathematics are distributed province wide and clearly demonstrate that by the time the Aboriginal students have reached Grade 4 they are already falling 10 percentage points behind their non-Aboriginal peers (School District 71’s Accountability contract, 2006-7). The full day Aboriginal Kindergarten program which, over the past eight years has transformed into a multi-aged Aboriginal Primary Program, was developed in order to support Aboriginal early learning in School District 71.

Research has shown the importance of teaching from an Aboriginal world view in the classroom setting in order to provide Aboriginal students with a value system that reflects their own cultural understandings. Agbo (2002) states his “ultimate aim” in the participative development of the Mohawk Culture Standards was to support teachers in using Aboriginal culture to raise students’ self-esteem, self-confidence and academic performance. Aboriginal worldview is virtually non-existent in most of today’s Canadian public school classrooms. This fact in itself may account for the success rate of Aboriginal students. Integrating Aboriginal peoples’ worldview into all Canadian students’ education has been proposed as beneficial to everyone (Ledoux, 2006). Classrooms rooted in Aboriginal values as the vehicle to deliver
Indigenous knowledge and teachings of the Oral Tradition can better support Aboriginal student learning (Agbo, 2002; Ledoux, 2006). Yet our public school system has provided English language instruction and knowledge based on their Eurocentric belief systems for more than a century (Battiste, 2004). Perhaps it is time for change.

This work is a narrative inquiry, and draws on stories evoked during Aboriginal talking circles grounded in the traditional values of listening, mutual respect, speaking from the heart and kindness and cooperation, to explore how the Aboriginal Primary Program impacted students’ self esteem. Clandinin and Connelly's discussions of narrative inquiry methodologies state that in effect, “Stories are the closest we can come to experience. A story has a sense of being full, a sense of coming out of a personal and social history” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p.4).

Talking circles were historically credited to the Woodland tribes in North America (Rickard, Running Wolf, 2003). They were traditionally used as a form of parliamentary procedure where everyone’s voice was heard equally, respected and listened to until a collaborative consensus was reached. The significance of the circle itself is seen as sacred, a never ending hoop representing the interconnectedness of all living things (2003). The talking circle process was used from early childhood through to adulthood as a means of education and provided a way to pass on knowledge, values, and culture. For these reasons I chose to use talking circles in the Aboriginal Primary Program. This method of learning models and supports respect for another's viewpoint and encourages participants to be open to others’ perspectives by listening with their heart while another speaks. It is seen as an effective
tool that fosters respect, models good listening skills, settles disputes, resolves conflicts, and builds self-esteem (Shegonee, 1999).

Graveline (2000) writes about the talking circle methodology paradigm in her poetic narrative and shares:

Teachings of the Sacred Circle.
Circular
  Flowing
  Integrative
Honouring Interconnectedness of All
Balancing Mental
  Spiritual
  Emotional
  Physical Dimensions

(Graveline, F., J. 2000, p.364).

Stories shared in this narrative research inquiry followed talking circle and territory protocols and were spoken in a good way.

The talking circles the children in the APP participated in daily were of four distinct kinds: greeting circles, talking circles, learning circles and sharing circles. All were facilitated using the same protocols steeped in the traditional values of listening, speaking from the heart, mutual respect, kindness and cooperation. The greeting circle was the opening exercise of learning every morning where the children greet the territory and each other in turn, in their own language. Talking circles were used when the students decided they needed to bring a pressing issue to the circle to discuss or problem solve to resolution. Myself and the students facilitated learning circles following circle protocol in order to teach concepts, model behaviours or tell stories. Sharing circles brought a close to our day where the children were
free to share a story, an experience or something Aboriginal from their culture or the Natural World. Talking circles encompassed a significant amount of time each day in the APP program and the children learned to express their feelings, concerns, joys and what they had learned that day in a respectful, caring and safe environment. In my experience of teaching the APP for eight years, I have seen the children demonstrate pride and confidence in saying their greeting in their own language, take initiative in asking to use talking circles to resolve problems and have demonstrated a powerful connection to the circle process by wanting to participate and speak their truth. I have witnessed children who have felt extremely uncomfortable about sharing anything with their peers, slowly begin to open their hearts and tell us who they are and what is important to them. They begin to make connections with the group and the process which in turn lays positive foundations for relationships in their learning.

Justification of the Study

As public schools’ worldview is based upon the dominant European value systems, Aboriginal student’s values and worldview are negated, resulting in Aboriginal students feeling misplaced, unseen and undervalued. Meaningful and relevant education for Aboriginal students requires fundamental changes to create a curriculum that is rooted in Aboriginal understanding of the world, not only in content, but also in the teaching and learning activities which are in harmony with their life experience. (Ledoux, 2006; Youngblood Henderson, 2000). The National Indian Brotherhood stated that one of the main reasons Native children do not do well in school is low self-esteem (NIB, 1972). In my experience of working with students in an Aboriginal Primary Program, I have witnessed that when they find a sense of place and
belonging in the classroom their achievement levels improve. Aboriginal educators have asked: “What if our teachings, traditions and worldview were the base from which we learned? What if our ways of knowing were presented on an equal footing with European knowings in the curriculum?” (Restoule, 2000, p. 37).

Hampton (1995) pronounced western education a “cultural holocaust.” His arguments state that western education seeks to indoctrinate Aboriginal children by using non-Aboriginal knowledge, values and identity in content and in structure, when providing Aboriginal students with an education. How do educators make learning meaningful to Aboriginal learners? What shapes the Aboriginal child’s learning journey in the public school system? These are just a few of the questions I have been asking myself for many years as an Aboriginal woman, mother and educator.

So where do we go from here? Dr. Marie Battiste discusses the use of special curriculum units on generic Aboriginal culture implementation as “the panacea of all inclusivities involving Aboriginal children” (Battiste, 2004, p.2). These units tend to provide watered down generalizations involving many cultural beliefs as opposed to the authentic cultural content in the children’s daily lives at home. So how do public schools provide a more authentic cultural experience for Aboriginal students? What will change look like? Dr. Battiste asks us, “How do students and families create renewed self-esteem in the context of poverty, residential school psychological pain, forced assimilation, and increasing despair?” (p.2). I have asked myself this question many times. Each time I come back to my own classroom and reflect on what has worked, is working and what the possibilities are for the future.
Prior to contact, Aboriginal children were taught by the community consisting of their immediate and extended families, Elders and neighbours. The oral tradition was the way children of all Native communities learned how the world came to be and their place in it (Khan, 1999). What must it have been like for Aboriginal children to leave their families and communities to go to residential schools? Is it possible today to create a renewed sense of Aboriginal identity and self-worth within our public schools? Where do Aboriginal children see themselves fitting in today’s classrooms? These are questions I keep revisiting.

The Aboriginal Primary Program developed in 2004 by myself in collaboration with School District 71’s Aboriginal Education Department, the Aboriginal Education Council, Aboriginal community and Elders, attempts to address these questions. Careful consideration was given to the importance of learning from place, (the territory the program takes place on), using traditional and respectful practices like talking circles to model and nurture Aboriginal values and a strong, vibrant play-based literacy and numeracy program. This study employs the practice of using talking circles, by following territory protocols rooted in the traditional values of: listening, mutual respect, speaking from the heart and kindness and cooperation in the Aboriginal Primary Program to explore students’ self esteem and motivation for learning.

The findings of this study may influence future directions in the field of Aboriginal education, public education and provincial teacher education programs. In addition they will inform the continuing implementation and possible changes to School District 71’s Aboriginal Education Enhancement Agreement, the Aboriginal Primary Program and mainstream public school classrooms in our school district. I believe only through collaboration between the
Aboriginal community, Elders, School Boards, Aboriginal Education Committees, School Administrators, students and teachers can culturally rich, supportive, meaningful and successful programs be implemented.

Research Question

How can the practice of using talking circles rooted in the traditional values of: listening; mutual respect; speaking from the heart; kindness and cooperation, help to understand Aboriginal Primary students’ self-esteem?

Definition of Terms

Self-esteem as defined by Dr. Branden is composed of two elements: self-efficacy, the confidence in one’s ability to think, learn, choose, and make appropriate decisions; and self-respect, confidence in one’s right to be happy and in the belief that achievement, success, friendship, respect, love, and fulfillment are deserving of us (Branden, 2006). Some examples of children demonstrating a positive self esteem in the classroom are: showing enthusiasm for new activities; creativity in having their own ideas; demonstrating confident in speaking, drawing, printing and making choices; the ability to take risks in learning, in social interactions, to mediate personal conflicts and the ability to ask for help when needed.

Aboriginal primary students are in grades K-1 and are self-identified as First Nations, Metis and Inuit people of Canada. Aboriginal peoples are recognized in the Canadian Constitution 1982 (Section 35), and include First Nations, Metis and Inuit (Royal Commission
Talking circles are used in many Aboriginal cultures to provide a safe environment for people to share their views with others (Regnier, 1993). Everyone is heard without criticism and participants speak when an eagle feather or talking stick is passed to them as it progresses one person at a time around the circle in the direction that follows the Territory protocol of the land the circle takes place on. Each person has a choice to speak when the feather or talking stick comes to them and each person’s words are respected and listened to.

Traditional values are the handing down orally of beliefs, practices or customs from generation to generation. Interpretations of cultural values are unique to particular life experiences, languages, teachings, knowledge, protocols and relationships to the land and all of creation, community, family history and ceremonies (Hansen, 2012). These beliefs form a standard to conduct ourselves by. Traditional values as stated by the author in this study are listening, speaking from the heart, mutual respect and kindness and cooperation. Listening is seen as the ability to watch the speaker, focus on the speaker’s words, keeping the body still, calm and quiet and no speaking at all unless you have been invited to by that speaker. A good listener never interrupts, waits his or her turn and demonstrates patience in listening to others. Speaking from the heart is telling the truth at all times and only speaking from a place of kindness, caring and love. Someone who speaks from the heart only says words in a way that they would like others to say words to them. Mutual respect is learning to love, honour and show consideration for our bodies, our feelings, our words and our choices so that we can love...
and honour others’. Kindness and cooperation is working together kindly, sharing and collaborating in order to learn and complete tasks.

Territory protocols are defined and discussed in the Haida Laas Protocol Agreement as being derived from the relationship of the people to the lands, the waters, and the life of their territory (Haida Laas, 2006). The K’omoks Territory as defined by treaty negotiations as the Englishman River to south Parksville, and north to Salmon River, Sayward, including Quadra Island and the community at large. Some examples of protocol are: acknowledging the Traditional Territory prior to the commencing of any ceremony in the K’omoks Territory; using counter-clockwise movement in dances, talking circles and organizational structures; honouring Elders by having them served the best foods first at all meals, giving them the best seating at all functions, having Elders enter first into all functions and ceremonies and always listening to their words.

Brief Overview of Study

“Our nation has developed without its own stories to honour our history.” These words were spoken at the First Nations Education Steering Committee conference by Dr. Lorna Williams (November, 2010). They continue to resonate in my thoughts and are the very reason I have chosen the narrative research approach in documenting the stories of parents’ and students’ experiences of their learning in the Aboriginal Primary Program. “We are in trouble just now because we do not have a good story. We are in-between stories. The old story, the account of how we fit into it, is no longer effective” (Berry, 1988, p. 132). It is time for us to
transform our history, the stories others have written about us, and it is time to write our own (Battiste, 2010).

The tradition of storytelling to pass knowledge of cultural learnings like codes of conduct, scientific and medicinal knowledge, ethical, historical and geological information (Restoule, 2000), was and is paramount in Aboriginal cultures.

*The focus of this qualitative research study was to document stories, an oral history, from the Aboriginal parents of the students, and the students themselves, who attended the Aboriginal Primary program over the past seven years, from September 2004 to December 2011.*
Chapter Two: Literature Review

What do Aboriginal students need to feel successful as learners and as individuals in the public school classroom? Are self-esteem and a sense of belonging important in learning? Ma (2003) used the data from the 1996 New Brunswick School Climate Study (NBSCS) to study students’ sense of belonging in Grades 6 and 8 in the Anglophone public school system. She used the results of the NBSCS survey consisting of four achievement tests (mathematics, science, reading and writing) and a student questionnaire, as the data to measure the students’ sense of belonging in relation to explanatory variables which were student and school characteristics.

One of the significant results of the data analysis showed a 0.72 $SD$ in the effect size self-esteem had on students’ sense of belonging. Students with higher self-esteem reported a more positive effect on students’ sense of belonging as did students’ general health having a moderate effect. The results indicated the better the students’ health the greater the sense of belonging with an effect-size index of 0.44 $SD$. “Students who had a greater feeling of worthiness appeared to feel more comfortable in their schools and students with good health may have had more capital to participate in academic, athletic and social activities” (Ma, 2003, p. 347). In terms of Aboriginal students, Ma ‘s research indicates that Aboriginal status was not statistically significant in itself, yet if Aboriginal students had a negative sense of belonging, then their problem appeared to be associated with their self-esteem and their health (Ma, 2003). In terms of the school level indicators affecting students’ sense of belonging, the school climate characteristics of feeling safe, cared for and treated fairly was conducive to their developing a
positive sense of belonging. Interpersonal relationships between teachers and students were emphasized as the key to promoting students’ sense of belonging which in turn could have a positive effect on students’ self-esteem and academic performance.

The results of Ma’s study seem to reflect what is known about student learning; a safe, caring environment supports a positive sense of belonging and is foundational in developing trusting relationships.

In my experience as an educator in the Aboriginal Primary Program, I have witnessed Aboriginal students’ piqued interest in the use of Aboriginal content in curriculum, yet I have seen even greater student engagement when Aboriginal values are practiced on a daily basis. Pedagogical practices utilizing storytelling, talking circles and sharing circles can provide rich learning opportunities for Aboriginal students and can strengthen independent and collaborative problem solving (Kanu, 2006).

Eileen Antone’s exploration and reflections of her silenced Aboriginal voice in her educational experiences as a student and as a post secondary graduate in Education inspired her to write a doctoral study pertaining to the importance of teaching Aboriginal children their history and cultural ways as they relate to their respective territories. Her findings indicate the significance of language, ceremony and cultural knowledge in nurturing confidence and creativity in lifting up the Aboriginal voices of our students (Antone, 2002). The data from her study indicates the importance of a bilingual-bicultural type of education comprising the knowledge, values and perspectives of the Aboriginal child’s culture of territory and the
Eurocentric worldview taught in public schools. The combining of the two cultures would make the circle complete, giving equity and a positive self identity to Aboriginal students (2002).

Antone’s research sought to explore self identity in reflecting on her silenced voice in “Euro-Western” education (p.94). Her conclusions spoke loudly and clearly to the imperative of a positive self identity for Aboriginal students in achieving academic success.

In inquiring about which classroom practices support Aboriginal students’ success, Haneef’s exploratory research utilized an ethnographic approach in observing in two Cree Nation rural elementary school classrooms (Haneef, 2010). The purpose of Haneef’s study was to provide some insight into the classroom happenings, challenges and strategies employed in two K-6 Aboriginal elementary schools through the eyes of the stakeholders, the students and teachers (2010). Both populations were predominantly Cree, one school being a band run school on reserve and the other being a community school with a 95% Aboriginal population fed by two reserves and a Métis settlement. Third, fifth and sixth grade classes were studied in each school.

Results of his data in terms of challenges and benefits for both students and teachers in rural Aboriginal elementary schools, shed light on the fact that students’ physical and emotional needs were not always met in the classroom, yet they found their classroom and school domain to be a warm and secure environment, much like a security blanket. In terms of incorporating culture into the classroom the study found that “elements of traditional Aboriginal culture were incorporated in the school experience in an interwoven, holistic and natural reflection of the student body population as opposed to covered in a tourist curriculum” (Haneef, 2010, p. 79). I
use this term, “tourist curriculum” often in describing Aboriginal content that is sprinkled into curriculum without the appropriate context, cultural knowledge and sensitivity.

Haneef further discusses the students’ academic challenges of motivation and engagement in academic learning and reflects on the data signifying the importance of the students’ connection to culture in tackling their academic anxiety. Identifying oneself with culture seems to provide connection for students and perhaps some resilience in learning. It is interesting to note that both schools’ results were very similar in terms of challenges and benefits for both students and teachers even though one school was a community public school and one was a band school.

Aitken and Bruised Head (2008) inquired about Aboriginal students’ ways of knowing math in two very different cultural settings. They invited Grade 3 students and their teachers from a Blackfoot band school and Blackfoot students from a neighbouring public school using a modified clustering sample method, to take part in their study. Their study results revealed that the overall mean achievement scores were similar for reserve and public school students, yet in terms of student attitude, reserve students were more confident with their answers. It is significant to note that Aboriginal public school students’ self-concept was weaker than Aboriginal reserve school students’ in terms of their confidence in mathematical abilities.

Atleo’s (1990) theory of cultural deprivation discusses the concept of Aboriginal children’s inability to adapt to Euro-American knowledge, cultural morals and values as a part of
their own social and cultural context. This may explain why the Reserve school students in Aitken and Bruised Head’s study demonstrated stronger self-concepts.

Researchers such as Atleo (1990) credited the failure of Aboriginal students in schools to cultural differences between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal societies. The premise was that the low achievement of Aboriginal students can best be understood in terms of the many efforts schools with dominant Eurocentric worldviews made in totally assimilating them. *I think this study raises awareness about the importance of cultural ways of knowing in teaching in the subject areas like mathematics, for example.*

*As my research question investigates the self-esteem of primary Aboriginal students in a cultural setting using talking circles steeped in traditional values, the effects of daily practice following protocol using the values to communicate with others can only help to strengthen students’ self esteem in all subject areas.*

Agbo’s (2002) research discusses the problem of Eurocentric values in the public school classroom in his study and clearly states the purpose of his Mohawk Cultural Standards Project as providing support for teachers and administrators to use more ethnic concepts that would foster self-identity, pride and self-confidence in Aboriginal students rather than using content and standards molded by Euro American concepts. The Mohawk Cultural Standards team consisted of eight people; three Aboriginal language teachers, a Home/School coordinator, two Akwesasne community members, a SUNY Potsdam faculty member and an Aboriginal graduate student. The cultural standards teams’ “central concern was to consider carefully how Mohawk
students acquire their attitudes, values and behavior patterns and how to translate these into strategies that would enable students to learn more effectively” (Agbo, 2002, p. 2).

The results of the participatory research over a period of two summers, 1998 and 1999, produced two sets of Cultural Standards; one for Aboriginal students, in terms of a cross-fertilization of Aboriginal and Euro American cultures, and one for administrators and classroom teachers. The standards consisted of specific guidelines and principles that were numbered and preceded by informative paragraphs explaining their purpose and uses. They were explicit, concise and heart-felt.

The Mohawk Cultural Standards research team also put forth a perspective that schools should aim toward a bi-cultural education approach, as the students need to master walking in both their cultural world and the present day Euro-American society (Agbo, 2002). I too feel it is imperative to provide Aboriginal students with the tools, confidence and knowledge to negotiate a balance between their cultural and present day Canadian mainstream worlds.

In Barnhardt’s 2005 article discussing Indigenous knowledge systems and Alaska’s ways of knowing, he seeks to “deepen our understanding of the learning processes that occur within and at the intersection of diverse worldviews and knowledge systems” (p.9). He discusses the importance of reconnecting education to learning from place and from cultural practices. Learning that makes connections between what the student and community already know and practice will be more meaningful to Indigenous students and provide motivation for continued learning.
In 1995 the Alaska Rural Systemic Initiative (AKRSI), a ten year educational development project provided a network of 20 partner school districts involving 176 rural schools serving 20,000 predominantly Aboriginal students, focused on integrating ways of knowing and Indigenous knowledge into their curriculum and pedagogical practices in order to improve the academic performance of students. This initiative focused on Indigenous science knowledge systems and Western science traditions, placing them side by side in order to develop a more culturally responsive science curricula. AKRSI attempted to bring the two systems together thus creating an overlap in the center in which they termed “Common Ground” (Barnhardt, 2005, p.16).

This analysis sought to preserve the integrity of both worldviews while highlighting the common organizing principles and relationships between them. The outcomes of this 10 year initiative are still in the process of being studied today by Indigenous researchers, yet the benefits of Elders, community, educators and students working and learning together embracing Indigenous knowledge and ways of knowing and Western worldviews can only benefit all learners in the transmission of knowledge in all forms.

It seems that relationships between learners, worldviews, ways of knowing and learning from place are all interconnected and related in the transmission of knowledge and learning. We are all connected to this planet and each other therefore it is from this place of relationship that all learning takes place.
Research Design

The aim of this research study was to investigate the effect of using talking circles rooted in traditional values following Territory protocols, on the self esteem of the students who attended the Comox Valley School District Aboriginal Primary Program over a time period from September 2004 to December 2011. In order for this research model to be congruent to Aboriginal students, parents, community and educators, I chose talking circles as a methodology honouring the Oral Tradition, to gather the stories of all the participants’ experiences in the Aboriginal Primary Program. Traditionally, many Native American communities have used the talking circle as a way of bringing people of all ages together for the purposes of teaching, listening, and learning (Anishinabeg Nation, 1999). My purpose for bringing parents and students together was to offer them an opportunity to share their stories about their experiences of participating in talking circles in the APP. Our stories shape who we are and how we interact with others. As Thomas King so eloquently shared, the truth about stories is that is all we are (King, 2005).

In deciding on how best to record and honour the stories shared in the talking circles I chose a narrative inquiry approach. As Clandinin and Connelly stated, “Narrative inquiry is stories lived and told” (Clandinin & Connolly, 2000, p. 20). As I walk in both worlds, I feel strongly that I need to represent my work using a recognized narrative inquiry methodology combined with an Aboriginal process, the talking circle, to story this research. Aboriginal people’s stories have not been represented in the written history of our country and it is time
that our voices are heard (Williams, 2010).

It is difficult for me as an Aboriginal researcher to “restory” the words of others using Eurocentric research norms and practices (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). *Taking meaning from words spoken out of context, or out of the talking circle, is disrespectful.* “To Elders only those who have Experienced an Event are Empowered to Speak about it” (Graveline, 2000, p. 362). *It is with this respectful intention that I have chosen to record and transcribe all the stories spoken in both talking circles and that I have only discussed parents and students’ actual words spoken in representing the common themes found in both talking circles.*

The stories were gathered at Ecole Puntledge Park Elementary school where all the students’ and parents’ attendance was voluntary. Two talking circles were organized, one for the parents of the students who attended the program and one for the students who attended.

**Sample**

Participants were obtained from a sample of students, and parents of students who had attended the Aboriginal Primary Program between September 2004 and December 2011. Parent and student consent forms were distributed to 50 families who had attended the APP at Ecole Puntledge Park Elementary and were still in attendance at the school between the years of 2004 and 2010. Recruitment letters explaining the purpose of the collection of stories were given out and parents and students were invited to attend the talking circle evening. The anticipated numbers of parents and students was approximately ten to fifteen per talking circle. The stories gathered from these talking circles were used in the writing and interpretation of this study.
Instrumentation

Talking circles were used to obtain the stories from students and parents who had attended the Aboriginal Primary Program. The parents’ and students’ participation was voluntary and both groups had a choice to use their own names to give voice to their stories.

Talking circle methodology reflected the daily practices of the students who have attended the Aboriginal Primary Program, (noted as APP in the following text), as the talking circle was the vehicle used to model, teach and practice traditional values in learning. Graveline (2000) discusses the talking circle process in her inquiry and writes:

Talking Circle as Methodology Enacted.
Traditionally a Sacred ceremony
A Gift from the Ancestors.
A physical reality
A Metaphysical experience.
An egalitarian structure
Each voice acknowledged
Heard in turn.
To choose words with care and thoughtfulness

Is to speak in a Sacred manner.
We can each have our own Voice
Speak our own Truth.

Tell our own Story.
In Circle all participants are encouraged to Be Self-reflective
Culturally located.
To Listen Respectfully to Others
provides another lens to view our own Reality (Graveline, 2000, p. 361).

In keeping with the classroom practice of using talking circles in the APP, I decided to use the same process as an instrument to elicit research data in the form of stories from the two talking circles’ participants used in this study. The talking circles organized took place in the
evening at the elementary school where the program is situated. It is cultural protocol to gather and share food when people meet in my M’ikmaq culture so I provided food prior to our circles. Following this protocol was an essential component in the execution of this research study.

One talking circle consisted of students who had attended the APP and the other circle was for the parents of the students who attended. Both circles were led by my colleagues in order to minimize researcher bias of the stories obtained. The talking circles were led using a talking stick following Territory protocols. The parent and student circles were given the research question to comment and reflect upon, “How did the use of talking circles using the traditional values of listening, speaking from the heart, mutual respect and kindness and cooperation, affect how you feel about yourself as a person and as a learner? The difference being the students’ question was presented and interpreted from the students’ perspective and the parents’ question was to be interpreted from the parents’ perspective of their child’s experiences in the APP. The talking circles were digitally video recorded in order to provide the names of the speakers.

Procedures

The information, recruitment letter and consent forms containing the date and time of the talking circle gathering, were distributed by the current teacher of the Aboriginal students’ who attended the APP program between September 2004 and June 2010, and who were still in attendance at the same elementary school. The consent forms clearly stated that participation in
this study was voluntary and they provided participants with the option of attending a de-briefing session to review the transcription of their story prior to its publication.

Upon arrival at the elementary school we followed the Territory protocol of a welcome greeting from a member of the K’omoks band and proceeded to share food. The two talking circles were then formed and led by my colleagues. Prior to commencing the talking circles, the facilitators read the Talking Circle Protocol sheet to the participants. Both circles were digitally recorded for ease of transcription of stories and to provide names of speakers.

The stories were then transcribed and analyzed for common themes relating to the talking circles’ use of traditional values and the students’ self esteem. No participants indicated they needed a debriefing session to review their transcribed story and make changes.

Validity

In order to minimize threats to internal validity, data collector bias was minimized by having my colleagues lead both the talking circles. My colleagues were an Aboriginal resource aide and a retired Aboriginal Education administrator who were both known to the parents and students who had attended the APP. Trust is essential in building and maintaining relationships with Aboriginal community (Van Hamme, 1995), therefore I chose two individuals known to our community. Even though I knew the parents and students understood I would be listening to their recorded stories, I wanted to offer them the opportunity to speak their own words in circle without having to be cognizant of what I would think about those words in their presence.
wanted to give everyone respectful space to speak from the heart instead of perhaps saying what I wanted to hear.

The open ended question used to lead the talking circles provided for instrument and subject attitude validity as students and parents had a choice to respond to the question and all their responses were honoured as per the talking circle protocol.

*Greeting the Territory and providing food at an Aboriginal gathering, follows protocol and also provides for instrumentation validity as appropriate protocol had been followed prior to the commencing of the talking circles.*

Data Analysis

*I listened to the stories spoken from both the talking circles many times before transcribing them in order to ascertain common themes. The themes I looked for in the parents’ and students’ stories were students’ feelings of connection to their classmates and their classroom, student’s feelings of connection to belonging to their culture, students’ feelings toward learning and students’ feelings towards their ability to make positive choices in directing their future learning.*
Chapter Four: Findings and Results

The following transcribed stories are presented in the talking circle format. The digital footage of the student and parent circles were spliced together in the creation of a video of the process. All speakers’ words were included in the video and the scribed stories below are taken from that video. In respecting the words of children and parents I chose to leave the story scripts whole in their content and to comment on their common themes after the talking circle stories concluded. This is my story of how the evening went...

The talking circles were held on a stormy November evening at Ecole Puntledge Park Elementary school. As parents and students exited their vehicles negotiating the rain and howling winds I greeted them at the school entrance. We all chatted and caught up on the days’ events and made our way to the library for visiting and some food. The older children gathered around a table eating chocolate brownies and sharing stories about their Aboriginal Kindergarten experiences as the younger ones looked on in awe. Parents were busy sorting their consent forms and signing last minute documents and the school principal, our video technician was staging the circle, checking the lights and perfecting his lens. I was looking around me, thinking how grateful I was to have been given this opportunity to bring families together to reminisce sharing food and stories. I was also very aware of the purpose of the evening, to learn about the impact of talking circles in the program I so carefully developed and nurtured. I can see, feel, hear and learn from the power of the talking circle daily but what do the children and parents really think? What kinds of stories will they tell? I all of a sudden felt very exposed like you really could see my heart on my sleeve. Just then the facilitators walked in and we smiled,
hugged and ate more brownies. Just as the little ones were beginning to collect speed around the chairs of the talking circle I welcomed everyone and we all listened to the Territory greeting by Tami from the K’omoks Nation. Tami then scooped up the young ones as the older students followed them down the hallway to the Aboriginal K/1 classroom to begin their talking circle. Lynn, a retired Aboriginal Education Principal, gathered the parents in the circle of chairs and began to greet everyone to the circle. I suddenly felt a little out of place, almost embarrassed, where do I go now? You see I chose not to facilitate either of the talking circles so I would not influence or bias people’s words, their stories. I wanted the stories to be their reflections without me in their shadow. So I slid out of the library trying to appear composed and walked down the quiet empty hallway to the next wing and the safety of my classroom. Then I remembered, oh, the children are in there. I decided to sit in Tami’s room, our Aboriginal resource aide, which was next to mine. I could hear quiet laughter, nervous giggles and had to look in to let them know ‘I am here, it’s ok, I see you, I just am choosing to let you speak.’ I then walked into the adjacent room and closed the door, content in the quiet calm of my space.

Guiding Question

“How did the practices of daily talking circles using the traditional values of listening, mutual respect, speaking from the heart and kindness and cooperation effect how your child felt about herself or himself as an individual and as a learner when they were in the Aboriginal Kindergarten/Grade One Program?”
Talking Circle Transcribed Stories

Lynn-

*Just watching, I’m thinking of the three different kids, and I say different because they all approached the circle in a very different way, so it was neat to watch how all three of them did it differently and I think that was one of the great things about Susan’s class is that you are welcome in the circle any time and you can just come in and join it at any point so you could see your kids doing, being part of that and watching them take part of the circle. So I’m thinking of Maya who is the oldest one who is the observer so she could just watch and see what everybody is doing and she would just take a lot of that in, and she spoke loudly from day one. One of the things that I remember is just how proudly she’d speak right away. In one assembly, Susan would have the kids go up and say their greeting and Maya was this five year old, who, many kids in that situation are very quiet, but Maya spoke up so loudly from the back, and our principal or VP at the time went “whoa” because it was so loud. But just that pride that she had and being able to speak up so it was nice to watch her do that. And then Alexander was a very different child, like the kind of boy running around in the circle and having a hard time sitting down. But he would still come and get very collected at that point in the circle and he’s not afraid to speak about what he thinks should happen and talk about problems or bring them up. And then Naomi said to me on the way here, because I was trying to convince her to come and she said that she remembers about being really quiet in the beginning and not saying anything, so she took a long time to come into speaking about, or speaking up in the circle. But I watched a lot of kids just be able to, what were the four things again?*

Lynn Joseph (facilitator) –

*We talked about listening, mutual respect, and speaking from the heart and kindness and cooperation.*

Lynn-

*Well you just watched so many of them go into that to and respecting each other and it was just this continuation day after day and they would have this practice every day and you would watch a lot of them grow, and even, Alexander’s class especially. I think there was about sixteen boys in that class and about five girls it seemed like, and they would just… Susan was amazing getting them all calm and they would learn to respect each other, a lot of wiggling but that was all accepted in the circle as well.*

Tami (facilitator) –

*Okay, you don’t have to speak right away if you’re not comfortable in saying anything. We’ll go around the circle, as we always do, and everybody will have their turn to speak to the question, and speak from the heart, too, how being in Susan’s class, in the Aboriginal Kindergarten and Grade 1 made you feel and when we did the talking circles, because talking circles was something that we did every day. Okay so the question, it says, how did the practice of daily*
talking circles using the traditional values, and there’s those four values and that’s listen which was the most important, mutual respect, speaking from the heart, kindness and cooperation. So how did these things, doing the talking circle with those four things in mind, how did that make you feel when you were in the Aboriginal kindergarten class.

John-

Well I respected others and I felt safe to speak my mind of my feelings.

Tami-

Great.

Jen-

To speak my mind and I felt safe...with everyone else.

Amber-

Uhm, I learned more respect, I felt more safe to speak my feelings and I loved to learn about my culture.

Kelly-

I think for Sarah initially it must have been really hard, because Sarah hardly ever speaks up she’s very introverted and shy so I think for her in the beginning it must have been really hard, but I also believe that it was really good too, in a way, make her say what’s on her mind and how she’s feeling. And ah, I heard her say some really neat stuff that I know under other circumstances she probably would have never said. So yah, and also I think it’s a great opportunity for children like Sarah who are so quiet and never say anything and usually get shouted over and stuff to get a chance for everyone else to be quiet while they listen to her story so I think that was really good for Sarah.

Nicole-

And ah, yah it was a good program for them and I know Jen was really quiet, she’s my youngest, she was really quiet in the beginning and ah, and now she’s just not afraid to speak from the heart, same as your Maya. And Jonathon really learned about respecting other people and when it’s their turn to talk because he’s so talkative and chatty and it took him a while you know to understand barriers and stuff it was really good for them both.
Maya-

When I was little I was always a little bit shy and when we did the talking circle every morning I felt I could express my feelings and that people were listening to me and they were paying attention and I just felt safe talking every day in the talking circle.

Ken-

Uhm, such a big question, I’m sure I have a lot to say about those values, uhm, the experiences Raven had in the kindergarten were all positive, overwhelmingly positive. She came from a very warm and caring, a loving educational environment at head start and went right into the Kindergarten and we were worried about transitions at that point and Susan did a great Job just from the start, she accepted everyone and that routine of a talking circle, a daily talking circle, uhm, really became a routine that set everyone at ease. You know Raven has certain anxieties in social situations that seemed to dissolve in the talking circle, she was quiet at first but then she gradually become more comfortable and developed a sense of poise of knowing where she was. That acceptance and that belonging was nurtured on a daily basis. So those talking circles were fairly significant of development. The values are fairly universal I think and though they are universal I don’t think they are always practiced though. We live in a loud world, we live in a world where everything’s going so fast and it’s difficult to be heard, especially for out quiet talkers, and I think the talking circle certainly gives them the voice and opportunity to really, to be heard. But that, more of that acceptance that comes from having that strong sense of belonging was really important in developing confidence and I was just, I was really impressed with her progression throughout the year and she became a lot stronger as a student.

Raven-

I think it helped us as an entire class because we got to know each other, and it helped because I got to learn how to listen better.

Lisa-

I’ve been talking to Ian the last couple of days about coming here and I asked him how he felt about coming here, and Ian is now a very good talker and he can rattle on, but when he first started Kindergarten he could not and was always shy when someone was watching. You watched him and he would shy away, well not anymore and he was able to say how he felt one word he used was, ‘it’s like home’. And that’s really a good feeling. I went as well when I dropped my children off and picked them up, and the respect, everyone had the chance to talk, which is very important. When a situation came up it was always resolved in the circle and everyone still had the chance to talk about whatever the situation was.

Janice-

So my daughter, Leela, is also like some of the children we’ve spoken about, quite a shy girl initially and has always been that way. And I would say it’s taken her a long time to warm up and certainly that is true when she started Kindergarten last year and we were new to this
community. We just moved a few months before, so it was a big change for her and, as is her style, it probably took until February or is in the school year for her to really warm up and really show her true colors. I think the talking circle, it just, it has this wonderful effect in terms of, recognition. Recognition of who a child is, recognition of where they’re at on that day in that moment where they are and that not everything is going to be fixed in that moment but let’s hear what you have to say and lets honour who you are right now and where you’re at right now. So there was this one story Leela had lost something at school that was quite precious to her and she was at the end of school and she was crying, was quite upset, and what was lovely was, yes she was upset it didn’t get resolved she didn’t find it you know we don’t know if someone took it or she just lost it but it was never resolved, she never did find it and was really sad but what was wonderful about it is that it was honoured, you know it really got listened to, it was honoured that she was upset, the kids got to know she was upset, Susan really tried to get the other kids to, what can we do to help her in that moment? and that was just lovely, and one of the other girls gave her something to try to help her feel better for losing this mini precious thing so that was wonderful. In Kindergarten I couldn’t imagine that that would happen when I was a kid. SO I just thought that was amazing and Leela as well because she is shy she’s... just because she’s shy and doesn’t talk a lot initially doesn’t mean she doesn’t think and observe, she’s quite an observer. Almost the first whole year, that’s what she was doing I think, observing and watching in this talking circle going on and watching how people could talk about what they were feeling and nothing was, you could say whatever you wanted, that was okay. And now, and this year, oh wow, she’s much more confident and speaks her mind and it’s just interesting to watch her with her older sister her older sister is much more rigorous and impulsive and will rule the world if you let her and she just has this really interesting way of handling her. It wasn’t always that way you know she really has this quiet way of speaking her mind but returning it in kind, and I think a good part of that is because she’s learned that she doesn’t have to be, act a particular way but she can still get what she needs, she’s practiced saying what she means in her own way that who she is that’s how she needs to do that and I think for all the children, I think they all develop that sense the talking circle gives them that sense of being able to, yah speak their mind but in a way that’s kind but strong, or quiet but strong but in their own way. Another thing I want to say I think this essence of the talking circle and what it does for kids at the closing ceremony... each year Susan always holds a closing ceremony and this year she told a story about every single child in the class... with parents and kids in a big circle. Each child sat on her lap while she told the story of how they progressed or something that was interesting and every single child was honoured and recognized for who they are, every child and it was just a beautiful, beautiful moment no one felt left out no one got an award that someone didn’t get. Everybody, everybody got awarded everyone was recognized and that was just really wonderful.

Caitlyn-

I felt respected and I felt safe of speaking my feelings and I wanted to learn my culture.

Sarah-

I was really shy when I was little so the talking circle helped me a lot
Nicole-

Claire was one of three girls in the class I think so there was a lot of boy energy and at the time she was still an only child, I think anyway, and so she learned and watched boys for a whole year and that girl will not let a boy push her around to this day. She just sat there through all the circles in a quiet, just like Janice said, in Claire’s own quiet way she can knock boys over just by looking at them. So she doesn’t have to worry about being bullied by a boy that’s for sure. And she carries those values with her today which is kind of neat she’ll come home and say, ‘yah I remember I did that in Kindergarten,’ or, ‘I wish we did that’, you know talking circles, she wished that they still did them in grade four. So back to Kindergarten I think it developed a strong sense of self, yah a good strong sense of self esteem, it really laid a good foundation for her and for everybody else in that class I think.

Lynn-

I think Alexander was able to speak from the heart a lot and I think he got quite good at that, Alexander does speak from the heart naturally I think but just that was really honoured in the class and he had that moment with that boy population to speak up and say what was bothering him or what he needed to talk about. And I connected to what you were saying about them all being honoured and they really were like their strengths came out and were really apparent. I think it helped me as a parent to figure out who they were too, watching them in that circle and their gifts were honoured and I know Susan at the end of the year in that circle would talk, she would mention it all year long as well but it was definitely at the end of the year when they got there, when they talked about their gifts that they had and it was nice to have them to really notice that in the circle but to have the teacher really notice that as well and I think that it helped me be a better parent too. I’m thinking of a situation that happened again in Alexander’s class where there were two boys that were kind of having some, quite a few problems at recess and it developed into a bit of a serious problem and the talking circle I think extended to the parents that year as well, because it was quite an issue, one boy hurt another boy and then it was just really respectfully done. There were sort of some feelings of, there was some really strong feelings about it but the circle went to the parents and everyone got a chance to say ‘what can we do?’ It was just really community building and the kids knew what was happening, now I can’t remember if there was a talking circle with the kids as well, I think there was but it extended right up to the parents, everybody got to have their say and it was just that, you could feel the power being a parent in that circle because everyone had a different point of view. I thought it was really community oriented and it really connected to what’s going on in our community now where we don’t have the opportunity to speak as a big group. It was nice and I think the kids realized that there was all this care about one boy and I think it was a really powerful message to our children about how to work together.

Kelly-

And I you know, listened to the other kids and they would bring up problems or issues that they had during that day, and I thought it was really cool because if it wasn’t for the talking circle no
one would have known about them. You know you’re daughter losing something really precious, or getting kicked by somebody or getting hurt or bullied or something like that and you know that everybody would listen to that person and acknowledge that happened. Sarah and I would go home and she would say, ‘I can’t believe it this happened to so and so’ and you know that they really start to think about the other person and care and that we talk about it and stuff like that just goes unnoticed I think. I have to say that I was so sad that it ended afterwards because it really left us hanging because I’m not Aboriginal and I have no connections. I thought it was really sad for Sarah that you know it had to end right after the head start and then the Kindergarten. It was really abrupt and sudden and Sarah was really sad for a long time and I think she would benefit so much if this was done in regular classrooms and she had a chance to speak up because I know she doesn’t, so I think it was really great for her and overall just the whole idea of listening to another person to just be quiet when another person speaks is really rare to find in a culture. I know I do it too, cut other people off, but I noticed it so much we just kind of talk right past each other. Everybody wants to get a word edge wise and you’re already thinking about your answer before the next person speaks again, and for the talking circle you all have to listen to each other, you can’t say anything even though you probably wanted to. You know so I think for kids that’s just so powerful because how many times do they get the undivided attention of a whole bunch of people and a grown up as well. I think for Sarah, I don’t know how she feels about it, but I think it’s pretty amazing that Susan did that.

Nicole-

On the way here actually I was thinking, that I didn’t say in the first round, both of my kids said the word, ‘safe’ but to say what they were feeling because Jennifer, it took a long time for her to come around in the class and feel confident and stuff but now she doesn’t even think about how she feels, she just says it and that’s something that definitely started in that class.

Ken-

I remember six years ago when Raven was in that first class. Yah, Susan did take all the kids at the end of the year and spent a lot of time with each kid celebrating the special things about that kid to the whole assembly and no kid was left out, no child was forgotten. And every child had, you could see this blossoming sense of worth as Susan’s talking about you know, ‘the teacher’s talking about me’ they would sit up tall, be very proud. There was no shame there was a, it was a special moment for these little bodies these little people as they start to come into their own. And that talking circle really helped that. I think the question itself, I’m going to make Susan mad because I can’t just talk about Kindergarten; I have to talk about what happened after. When Raven left, she moved on, like most kids do and it was a different world for her of a sudden she had to negotiate the differences of a different classroom culture, and that was at first difficult and you know she had some transition issues with that, but remember that thing, ‘the only thing I learned in life I learned in kindergarten,’ well that really has fallen true because those lessons in the talking circle and those values that come from Kindergarten still exemplify in her daily life. You know her passion for other people, her sense of justice and otherwise, she knows when someone is doing something wrong and she wants to do something about it. She doesn’t always
know how to, how to solve the problem but she talks with her peers and they work something out together. So those are things that they learned in that talking circle, you know those values are carried on through the years. It is too bad we don’t have more talking circles in the classroom but they need to be done right in order to be done effectively, in order for the impact to be there. I think the thing that needs to be done is the repetition on a daily basis, that honouring that there was no shame. So it’s too bad that’s not done more often afterwards. And I think for Raven, again she still has certain anxieties about certain things but she does feel.... we see the pride she has in the work she does and she cares about what she does now and I think that stems from those original lessons.

Amber-

I learned more respect, and I also felt more safe to speak my mind and I just liked kind of learning my culture.

Maya-

When we did the talking circles I felt that I could let my feelings out and I think I felt comforted by everyone would watch me and would listen to what I had to say and I think I really liked the talking circle because it made me feel comfortable with myself.

Raven-

I think it helped us as an entire class to get to know each other more and it helped me know myself because I used to be shy.

Ian-

I don’t want to say.

Caitlyn-

I felt safe to talk about my feelings in the talking circle and I learned how to express myself.

Sarah-

I was really shy when I was little and I had a hard time telling other people how I felt and I used to really feel like I was safe to tell other people how I was feeling.

Lisa-

I think I’m stupid,’ you know these are words we don’t use in the house this is him already thinking it at age five, ‘I don’t want people to see me dance, they’ll make fun of me they’ll laugh at me,’ and he would stand back, probably for the first couple months until he felt comfortable
and now there’s really no stopping him, he’s you know one of the first out there dancing or something like that transpires. And that’s awesome because I used to watch him stand back and it hurt to see him not being included and I always worry about my children missing out, go have some fun, you know? Go enjoy and he does, he now does enjoy. He’s also, there was a situation where, we believe a couple of teenagers, I don’t know if it was two or three that came into the school yard here and scared a couple of the kids from this class. This was just... was this last year? But Ian still felt safe enough and still felt like home and...... To Mrs Leslie told her what had happened with a bunch of the kids. And she heard what they were saying and she figured out what they were saying, because they couldn’t say teenagers, they had to describe, ‘big like you, tall like you’ and she was able to at that point ‘oh pretty sure these aren’t kids at our school’ and immediately handled it and handled it well as in let the parents know, she got the police involved and you know what? I don’t think that’s going to happen again for a while because of how it was handled I’m pretty sure, it was talked about and those boys would be scared to do it, well at least in this area. Ian never had any nightmares or anything from it so I think Susan helped my son feel, even though he felt scared he felt good by the end of the day when I came to pick him up and that was fantastic. He’s really developing into a certain little guy he’s smart he’s got to try to pull out his lessons and he’s doing great and it’s all up to Susan because he feels good about who he is and each little success he has, he feels fantastic about himself. He didn’t have that going into kindergarten and thanks to Susan and the circle and that’s where everything is always done is in the circle to talk about it, that everyone hears because everyone has to hear you know you have to give that person who’s speaking time, and let the words come their words and its made a big difference in Ian’s life I think, and mine. So it’s made me more aware of making sure I listen to him. We don’t have a talking circle at home but when he speaks we listen more.... I think that’s the learned behaviour, and still learning...

Caitlyn-

I learned how to be respectful and I was a little shy and now I’m not.

Sarah-

It helped me with my shyness because I never used to tell other people how I feel.

Nicole-

I just wanted to quickly touch on something Ken had said about, actually a few of you have said that, after a year of Susan’s circles and all inclusiveness, it’s a huge drastic change to go from kindergarten to grade one and you have none of the support and you have to... our darling sweet little children have to pull all those little lessons out from somewhere inside of them to be able to cope in the real world and it’s really really rough, it’s hard to see your baby coming home from school crying everyday because it’s not like kindergarten, grade one was really tough for us and I’m sure it was for you guys as well but her lessons through the talking circles were imbedded deep enough that my kids were slowly able to pull them out and use them and I think that’s one of the gifts she has.
Lynn-

It helped me be a better parent as well and I think that it helped me be a better teacher, really listening and hearing what the kids had to say because you think these little guys, you’re not sure you know you’re talking all the time and things are happening all the time and as a parent you’re really busy. It just made me realize how important it was to listen to those little stories, and then the other thing I really liked about the talking circle is that it just seemed to make that connection between home and school easier, like at home they’re with you in a safe world and you can keep them kind of... but I remember Susan came to our house with Maya the very first year she came to our house and made that nice connection with the kids. Maya was attached to her before Kindergarten even started, so going into that school was really easy and coming into that circle, we miss it and we feel really lucky to have been part of it.

Kelly-

Kindergarten.... well Sarah’s still hopefully friends with most the kids there and I just think they get to know each other on a whole different level because in the talking circle, not at first maybe but eventually kids open up and say stuff that they normally wouldn’t, because it’s embarrassing. So I’m really grateful for the talking circle and Susan I think she did a great job and like I said I just wish there was more of it now when the kids are older because I think now it would be even more important.

Nicole-

It’s hard for John to make friends right now so I’m sure if there was some talking circles things would get resolved, and they would see him for the person he was.

Ken-

Talking circles are where you can face your peers and know that you’re going to be heard. To go to straight rows all you ever see is the back the head of the person in front of you and the person talking all day. I think in my practice as a high school teacher when I ask my students to arrange the desks the way they want, they if anything they go into a semi circle or whole circle so it’s something that they, the students really value. I think one of the proofs of the values of the talking circle and the values of the lessons learned, how our children want to go back and they often talk about, Raven talks about, ‘oh today I was in Susan’s room, I went back to kindergarten, their so cute daddy,’ and you know she forgets that she was one of those cute little children before and it is a sort of pride when she talks about her experience in that kindergarten class because it wasn’t just kindergarten class it was her class and she identifies with her peers and they are still friends. They still connect and they do things together, and you know it’s really special she’s going to have that for her whole life time and hopefully she’s going to have those friendships for life time and there’s going to be great days and bad days but through it all she’ll have that quiet confidence and that poise I was talking about earlier which is something that she really didn’t have before at head start she would cry when we put her on the bus and she’d cry for about thirty seconds until the bus got around the block and then she’d be talking with the bus driver, ‘oh how was your day,’ so she could talk. She could articulate like that but she couldn’t really
talk about her feelings she never told us why she was crying. After kindergarten she certainly specifically told us how she was feeling, it was a privilege, is a privilege.

Lisa-

Ian is telling me everyday how he feels and that didn’t used to happen and he has no problem articulating, ‘mommy why are you mad?’ well how do I get mad about that? Because I’m tired and I want to say that’s thanks to the circle you know to Susan and so I know we are going to be okay.

Talking Circle Concluded

My mind was sifting through all the stories over the years that the children had shared in circles and I was wondering if they knew just how much their words had affected my thoughts, words and actions; how much their stories were a part of the fabric I wore every day. Then the door swung open,

“Susan can we have some more brownies now?”

The children came flooding in, seemingly worried about me in this little room by myself. We all chatted and decided to bring in some shapes to build with and the older children gathered at the adjacent table to tell more stories. The room filled with laughter as we all found our place again, together.

Tami offered to go down to the library to check on the parent talking circles’ progress and to see if she could sneak us some food; perhaps the veggie plate this time. The children continued to share stories of their time in the APP and made sure to brief me with each one, “Do you remember when............Susan, wasn’t it great, I want to do that again!”
I felt warm enveloped in their wonderful stories, blessed by my many experiences with their learning and honoured by their words. Maybe this is what it is like to be a grandma? Tami came back carrying water and snacks and the stories continued....

The moms and dads slowly filtered down the hallway to the classroom area, still sharing stories, laughing and connecting. I greeted them, feeling a little embarrassed and not really knowing why; I guess I wondered about the stories told. I noticed some teary eyes and stood close for reassurance, saying nothing. Then I was hugged, “That was great, I am so glad I came, we really miss you.”

As we began to stroll back to the library together, the children tidying the blocks and stacking chairs, the little ones racing ahead with visions of brownies still left on the plates, I had a sense that a good thing had happened that night. I would not know until I saw the videos just how much the stories shared would shape my learning journey.

Ken stopped me outside the library and said, “Susan you did a good thing here tonight, don’t be mad at me, I might have spoken about things other than your question. I just had to!” I smiled and said, “This was your night to tell your stories and I am glad that you did.” We hugged, laughed and said our goodbyes as the remaining brownies vanished down the hallway with the children. The halls became quiet and I went into the library to check in on my filmers and facilitators to make sure they received their gifts and to give us a chance to share stories of the evening. It felt strange to have these four people relating stories about my classroom, my
students, my work; and I wasn’t a witness to them, at least not directly. I listened, smiled and hoped that the words spoken in the talking circles would be enough. Enough to tell the amazing, lived, heartfelt stories that lingered within my classroom walls.

Findings and Interpretations

The stories shared from the parent and student talking circles were transcribed from the video created of the entire footage of both talking circles. There were a total of 7 adults and 10 students who took part in the two talking circles, 14% of the parents and 20% of the students participated. The common theme that was most frequently shared in the parent and student talking circles was how students felt safe to speak the feelings from their heart. One student, Maya shared how she felt safe speaking about her feelings and she felt comforted by her peers listening to her words. Jan Robertson (2005) states how important relational trust is in building respectful learning cultures that are open to challenge and change. She discusses how relational trust is developed through shared vulnerability and for Maya; she must have felt safe in exposing her vulnerability in the daily practice of speaking in the talking circle.

Next to the common theme of feeling safe, the students and parents expressed the powerful impact of being listened to and learning to listen, in the talking circles. Respectful communication involves listening. Deep listening fosters and affirms esteem among individuals in an organization (Bryk & Schneider, 2002) and in a classroom of learners. Caitlyn spoke about learning to be respectful in the talking circles and how she felt respected by others when they listened to her.
Many parents spoke about their child’s feelings of belonging, pride and confidence when they were in the Aboriginal Primary Program. Ken spoke about how his daughter Raven developed a sense of acceptance, confidence and “poise” in knowing who she was in the classroom. Ken further stated how the daily practice of participating in talking circles nurtured Raven’s sense of belonging and throughout the year she became a lot stronger student.

Janice spoke about the development of her daughter Leela’s confidence. Leela was very shy for the better part of her first year in the program, yet over time her confidence built in a way that allowed her to remain her own quiet self yet with the ability to speak strongly about issues that were important to her. *Leela recently introduced herself in her own language to a group of trustees, board members, a Member of Parliament and administrators at a public meeting where she led her class on the drum in an Aboriginal song of greeting to the visitors to our territory. Leela is six years old.* Janice attributes this confident leadership to the values Leela learned in the talking circles, “the talking circle gives her the sense of being able to speak her mind in a way that is kind, but strong; her own way.”

Parents mainly spoke to the fourth common theme regarding their children becoming a stronger student, themselves becoming stronger parents and the community building capacity of the talking circles. Lynn spoke about an event in her story that had transpired in her son Alexander’s class where not only the students met on the talking circle to resolve the classroom conflict but parents, Elders and community met in a separate talking circle in the classroom to discuss the well being of the children involved in the conflict. “Parents got a chance to say what
can we do? You could feel the power of being a parent in that circle because everyone had a
different point of view, and it was really community building.”

The impact of student, parent and community engagement in the talking circles was a
commanding message to the children about how to work together in resolving conflict. As
Quinn so eloquently put it; “What matters is not how we resolve a conflict but how we maintain
relationships in resolving it” (Quinn, 2006, p. 161).

Parents and students spoke to the impact talking circles had on their ability to resolve
conflicts with their peers in a good way. Sarah’s parent spoke about the children getting “hurt or
bullied” and how everyone would listen and acknowledge what had happened. She continued to
speak about how situations like this would go on unnoticed if it weren’t for the daily talking
circles. Nicole spoke of her daughter Claire’s confidence in speaking her truth on the talking
circle, “she doesn’t have to be worried about being bullied by a boy that’s for sure.”

Ken shared a story about his daughter Raven’s passion for other people and her “sense of
justice. She knows when someone is doing something wrong and doesn’t always know how to
solve the problem, but she talks with her peers and they work something out.” In fact he
continues to speak about Raven’s connection with those peers from her Kindergarten class:

*They still connect and they do things together. It’s really special; she’s going to have that for
her whole lifetime. There is going to be great days and bad days, but through it all she’ll have
that quiet confidence, those friendships for a lifetime.*

Lisa spoke about becoming a better parent by listening to her son Ian when he felt
confident in speaking with her about issues that were important to him. “Everything is always
done in the circle… and it has a made a big difference in Ian’s life I think, and mine. So it made me more aware of listening to him…when he speaks we listen more.”

Lynn spoke about the positive effect of honouring each student in the talking circle by the daily practice of respectful listening and speaking from the heart; “their strengths came out and were really apparent.” Nicole stated, “Talking circles… I think they developed a strong sense of self, a good strong sense of self esteem, it really laid a good foundation for Claire and everyone else in that class I think.”

Mary-Lynne Epps, a leading educator in inquiry and formative assessment in the Nanaimo School District, spoke about the importance of creating a community of learners in her classroom prior to learning inquiries when she presented at a workshop I attended. She stated that trust, respect, safety and relationship were crucial in developing a positive community of emotionally engaged learners (Epps, Feb., 2012). Talking circles can create, nurture and support the safe, respectful, trusting environment needed to emotionally engage learning in the classroom.

Unexpected findings from the parent and student stories shared in the two talking circles were the difficult transitions the students experienced when they left the APP. The safe, trusting and respectful learning relationships that were nurtured and supported daily by the talking circles were not present in the students’ following year classrooms. Nicole spoke of:

_The huge drastic change to go from kindergarten to grade one with no support and the children have to pull all those little lessons out from somewhere inside of them to be able to cope… it’s really tough, it’s hard to see your baby coming home from school crying everyday because it is_
not like Kindergarten. Grade one was really tough for us and I’m sure it was for you guys as well, but her lessons through the talking circles were imbedded deep enough that my kids were slowly able to pull them out and use them.

A few parents had spoken to me about the difficult time their child had in the following years after attending the APP. I was not aware of just how many children were struggling in trying to adapt to their mainstream classrooms cultures.

Table 4.1 displays the 14 common themes found and their frequency of occurrence in the student and parent stories.

Table 4.1

Common Themes and Their Frequency

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Difficult Transitions</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Better Parent</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community Building</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Honor Each Other</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Confidence</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Culture</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stronger Student</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pride</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sense Of Belonging</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Can Share Feelings</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Safe</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Respected</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Listened To</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conflict Resolution</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
In order to better organize the data I grouped the 14 common themes into 4 major understandings with the most frequently stated themes represented first.

1. Safe to speak feelings from the heart in conflict resolution

2. Listened to, respected, honoured and recognized

3. Sense of belonging, pride, culture confidence

4. Stronger student, better parent, community building

The unexpected theme that surfaced in the parent and student talking circles, the problem of difficult transitions, was addressed by 5 out of the 7 parents, or 71%. I chose to represent the data using a circular model highlighting the percentages of each parent and student’s frequency of themes. The sacred circle honours the words of parents and students just as the talking circle gave voice to them.
Table 4.2

Frequency of Parent and Student 14 Common Themes Represented in a Circle of Percentages

Frequency of 14 Common Themes Represented in Percentages

- Can Share Feelings: 20%
- Safe: 9%
- Respected: 9%
- Listened To: 8%
- Conflict Resolution: 8%
- Difficult Transitions: 6%
- Better Parent: 6%
- Community Building: 7%
- Honor Each Other: 6%
- Confidence: 6%
- Culture: 4%
- Stronger Student: 4%
- Pride: 4%
- Sense Of Belonging: 5%
Chapter Five: Summary and Conclusions

Discussion

*Education devoted only to analytical learning of the mind creates an emotional disconnect from the heart and spirit of Aboriginal students. We walk and learn in respectful relationships with our Elders, peers, colleagues, community and all things in the Natural World around us. It is these relationships in learning that are reflected, nurtured and supported by using talking circles practicing the traditional values of listening, mutual respect, speaking from the heart and kindness and cooperation in the classroom.*

This study honoured the stories of students and parents in understanding the effects of the practice of using talking circles rooted in listening, mutual respect, speaking from the heart and kindness and cooperation on Aboriginal primary students’ self-esteem. This research question was prompted by the need to increase Aboriginal graduation rates in the province of B.C. and for every child in our communities to live their passion and feel successful. “We cannot destroy this in the name of school” (Williams, November, 2010).

The public school system is defined by Euro culture worldview values (Williams, November, 2010). Aboriginal scholars have repeatedly stated the inclusion of Aboriginal cultural ways of knowing, values and cultural knowledge imbedded across school curricula would help to close the gap between Aboriginal students graduation rates and their non Aboriginal counterparts (Kanu, 2006). Worldviews in public schools based solely on Euro-
American educational standards and values of excellence will continue to generate the same minimal, unsuccessful graduation results for Aboriginal students.

Learning is about respectful, trusting relationships and “trust is essential for learning improvement” (Halbert & Kaser, 2009, p. 45). This study’s purpose was to provide some understanding of the effects of using talking circles rooted in traditional values in an Aboriginal Primary Program on Aboriginal students’ self esteem. The stories shared by students and parents who attended the APP spoke to the power of the talking circle as a positive learning vehicle in building trusting relationships where students felt safe, respected, listened to and honoured for sharing their feelings in conflict resolution. Parents spoke to the daily practice of talking circles as community building not only in the classroom but in their homes as they felt like they had become better parents as a result of listening more to their children. We are a community of learners and our classrooms need to reflect trusting, respectful relationships in learning.

The research findings uncovered a problem for students and parents in the difficult transitions into their next year classrooms. Parents spoke of how they anguished when their children came home in tears daily because they did not feel safe, respected, heard, or emotionally connected to their peers in the new classroom culture. Students and parents voiced the need for talking circles in all their classrooms.
Limitations

One of the goals of this research study was to honour the stories of students and parents who attended the APP between the years of 2004 – 2010. Giving voice to Aboriginal families regarding their children’s education in the public school system demonstrates relational trust and respect. The words spoken by both students and parents on both talking circles do not represent the entire group of families who attended the program over the period of seven years.

Using the talking circle as the method to collect narratives from the participants required parents and students to come to a gathering outside of their home in the evening at the school. As the circles were happening on one evening only at a specific time, some families were unable to attend, therefore limiting the amount of people in attendance at both talking circles.

The stories gathered are narratives that have been spoken following Aboriginal protocol, in a respectful traditional manner, in a good way. As much as possible I tried to honour students’ and parents’ words. In this process I may have made assumptions that were not intended by the speaker.

Recommendations for Practice

Talking circles provide students, teachers, parents and community with a process to resolve conflicts, discuss and learn about issues, share feelings and build trusting relationships with each other. In the APP the talking circles are used to provide students with an opportunity to learn respectful, kind, listening behaviors in self-regulation, resolve conflicts and to speak to others from their heart in a way that they would like others to speak to them. The very nature of
the talking circle practiced daily builds relational trust with others and honours Aboriginal student voice in learning.

Researchers from the OECD Centre for Educational Research and Innovation have made significant contributions in analysis of learning by their Innovative Learning Environments project which summarized key conclusions about optimizing learning. Dumont and Istance, researchers from the OECD centre ask us as educators to create learning environments that support and encourage self-regulation as part of the learning process (Dumont & Istance, 2010). Environments that foster self-regulation support the student’s ability to use their emotions as a source of energy or to maintain attention and motivation in the face of taxing problems” (Dumont & Istance, 2010, p.320). The talking circle provides for a remarkable learning environment that supports self-regulation in learning by the practices of listening respectfully to others, responding only when it is your turn to speak, speaking from the heart in expressing your feelings, conflict resolution in building trusting relationships with your peers and supporting students in making positive choices in learning.

In the seven key conclusions Dumont and Istance (2010) suggest will support an effective learning environment in the 21st century, the following five of the seven principles are supported by the use of talking circles in the classroom.

1. The learning environment recognizes the learners as its core participants, encourages their active engagement and develops in them an understanding of their own activity as learners.
2. The learning environment is founded on the social nature of learning and actively encourages well organized co-operative learning.

3. The learning professionals within the learning environment are highly attuned to the learners’ motivations and the key role of emotions in achievement.

4. The learning environment is acutely sensitive to the individual differences among learners in it, including prior knowledge.

5. The learning environment strongly promotes “horizontal connectedness” across areas of knowledge and subjects as well as to the community and wider world.

The vital role emotions play in student achievement strongly supports the social nature of learning in talking circles. Cooperative learning activities that engage all learners can have a positive impact on strengthening bonds among students from diverse backgrounds (Dumont & Istance, 2010). The relational trust built in the daily practice of talking circles and the cooperative values shared in participating in them provide a foundation for cooperative learning classroom activities.

Student learning in today’s world requires students to have a deeper understanding about themselves as learners, an “adaptive competence” (Dumont & Istance, 2010, p. 321). This adaptive competence in learning is developed by the interplay of the roles of emotions, motivation and cognition in the development of learning (2010). All students can benefit from the practice of talking circles rooted in the traditional values of listening, mutual respect,
speaking from the heart and kindness and cooperation in today’s classroom learning environments because students are the core participants engaged in self-regulating their learning behaviour using their emotions in problem solving and their motivation in making cognitive contributions and responses to their peers.

School and district leadership fostered by a moral purpose in making talking circles a priority in public school classrooms is a strong start in a positive direction to support Aboriginal student learning in the 21st century. Informal leadership in this direction has begun in School District 71 as I have received a grant from the Aboriginal Enhancement Schools Network in order to bring talking circles to 13 other English and French Immersion classrooms in the elementary school the APP is situated. 13 teachers, two thirds of the classrooms in the school have volunteered to bring talking circles into their programs. This process of cultural sharing and learning has begun and Aboriginal students who have graduated from the APP are supported in leading these talking circles in their classrooms.

“Learning to live together, to be, to do and to respect” (Halbert & Kaser, 2009, p. 30) each other in and out of our classrooms and our communities, is optimal in navigating student learning in today’s global learning environment. This is why it seems even more imperative that cultural pedagogical practices paired with Aboriginal values support Aboriginal curriculum in providing students with authentic learning environments that reflect the duality of walking in two worlds. The results of this research, the stories of students’ and parents’ experiences in talking circles speak strongly to the power of respectfully embedded Aboriginal curriculum.
The talking circles provided students with a safe, respectful, learning environment to take emotional risks in their learning, which builds relational trust with their teachers and their peers. This cooperative process that honours student voice bolsters the children’s’ confidence in supporting a strong sense of self and a sense of belonging, not only to the class, but to the learning community. I sincerely hope that at the end of each day I can reflect on Dr. Lorna William’s words, “Learning is by doing, practicing, experiencing, giving, sharing and going beyond ourselves; doing a job to completion in a good way” (Williams, Nov., 2010).

Recommendations for Future Research

In the process of completing this research project four teens in my community took their lives; my son’s dear friend being one of the four. He was like a son to us, a brother to both my children. The students, parents, families and businesses in our community have united in our grief to try to bring support groups, community services, peer mentors, school legacy projects and healing to our hurting youth and their families. Having lost my husband’s son to suicide in 1999, our family has walked this path before; my son and daughter walk it again now. I ask myself many questions as an educator about how to engage students in their learning, and now I ask myself how do we engage students in their lives?

Doctors who have studied adolescent suicide have put forward many theories. Joiner (2004) states that teens sometimes feel a sense of being disconnected from others, an absence of closeness in a relational sense and Williams (2001) talks about the inability to problem solve, subsequently the teens find themselves needing an escape from their predicament. In pondering
In this heart wrenching, desperate situation young people may find themselves in, I wonder if the powerful impact of talking circles rooted in the four traditional values may in fact offer some strategies, hope and relational connection for struggling teens. I would like to see research information regarding the use of talking circles rooted in traditional values in supporting and engaging our youth. “It is about improving the life chances of every child” (Halbert & Kaser, 2009).

Conclusion

In watching the video produced from both talking circles I was immediately struck by the clarity of the images the stories told brought back to my memory. I was re-living their remembered moments and found myself moved to tears many times. Of course the tears were followed by bouts of laughter as my emotions ran the gamut and I was filled up; filled up with loving experiences of learning. I realized that we all were connected now, by our stories shared and our experiences learned together.

I was fully aware of my purpose in bringing families together that night but somehow that purpose had lost its meaning as I remembered the stories, so many rich, wonderful every day stories of the children and I learning about each other and how we fit together in each others’ lives. The talking circles were much more than a vehicle to model, nurture and practice our traditional values, they were the life source of our stories and the stories were now part of us; we had created history together.
I have recorded common themes, looked for key powerful words spoken and represented my data with figures, tables and citing from other scholars’ work. Yet I can never fully represent the stories lived and shared in the talking circles, for they are carried safely within all of us who sat in those circles.

How do I qualify or quantify our shared experiences, they simply are moments stored within us that contain meaning individual to each of us. The stories are woven into the fabric of the clothes we wear each day, warming us when we feel cold and lonely and cooling us when our hearts are on fire.

The stories honoured here were spoken from the hearts of learners. The talking circle provides a sacred place for children, adults and Elders to speak, share stories, learn and resolve conflicts in and out of the classroom. Learning is about the relationships we generate in all the circles of our lives. There are many more stories to tell.
References


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Appendix A

FACULTY OF EDUCATION
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British Columbia, Canada V9R 5S5
Tel (250) 740-6221 Fax (250) 740-6463
http://www.viu.ca/education/

Student Assent Form for Participation in
“Honouring our Stories: Aboriginal Primary Students’ Sense of Belonging in Public School Classrooms.”

Principal Investigator: Susan Leslie, Master’s student, Faculty of Education, Vancouver Island University, contact phone number: 250 792-0104

Research Supervisor: Rachel Moll, PhD, Faculty of Education, 250-753-3245 x2161

Purpose:

I am doing a research study on how talking circles and Traditional values affect how primary students feel about themselves.

I plan to present the results of this research in a paper for my masters thesis. Hopefully, as well, it will be used to help improve what you are taught in school.

You are being asked to participate in this research because you attended the Aboriginal Primary Program between September 2004 to June 2010.

What you are being asked to do:

You are being asked to participate in a ‘Talking Circle’ that will follow Territory rules and will be led by Tami Compton.

The question that you will be asked to talk about at the talking circle is:

“How did the practice of daily talking circles using the Traditional values of Listening, Mutual Respect, Speaking from the Heart and Kindness and Cooperation affect how you felt about yourself when you were in the Aboriginal Kindergarten/1 program?”

If you agree, I plan to videotape the talking circle so I will know what each person said. You can say your own name and experiences during story collection, if you want, but please try not to say things that will identify others. You can have your name used when I publish your story in my research paper, but you don’t have to, if you don’t want.
If you want to look at how I wrote down your story, you can come to a meeting and tell me if you want me to make any changes before I publish it. If you want to come to this meeting, please write down your name and telephone number at the end of this form.

There are no known risks to you for taking part in this research.

Your participation in this research may help teachers, your school principal and other students better understand what to do to help students learn and feel good about themselves.

If you choose, and your parents agree, you may be identified by name in any reports of the completed study. Otherwise, no one will be able to tell what you said if you don’t want them to.

Contact for more information about the study:

If you have any questions or would like more information about this study, please contact me at Ecole Puntledge Park Elementary, 250 334-4495 or at 250 792-0104.

Concerns about your treatment in the research: If you have any concerns about how you were treated in this research, please contact the VIU Research Ethics Officer at reb@viu.ca or by telephone at (250) 753-3245 (ext. 2665).

Consent:

Your participation in this study is entirely voluntary and you don’t have to participate if you don’t want to, even if your parents say it’s okay. You can also quit or leave the study at any time and for any reason.

Your signature indicates that you consent to participate in this study and for the talking circles to be video-recorded. Only those who consent to be videotaped will be.

If you decide you want to take part in this study, please also ask your parents'/guardians’ permission and, if it’s also okay with them, ask them to sign this form (at the end), too.

____________________________________________________________________________
Your name(s) (please print)
____________________________________________________________________________
Your signature(s)                            Date

Researcher’s signature to indicate that child has provided written or verbal assent to participate:

______________________________
Susan Leslie
If you **choose to** have your name used in the publishing of your story in this research paper,

Please sign below. (If you do not wish to be videotaped or have your name be used in the publishing of this paper, they will not be even if your parents consent to it.)

__________________________________
Student’s signature

**Parent’s/Guardian’s Consent**

1. If you consent to allow your child to participate in this research, please sign in the space below:

__________________________________ Parent’s/Guardian’s Signature

2. If you **consent** to have your child’s name used in the publishing of this research paper, please sign below:

__________________________________ Parent/Guardian signature

Phone number______________________ Email_______________________________

Please return a copy of these forms in the sealed envelope, to the **office at your child’s school**. They will forward them to me via the inter-school mail.
Parent/Guardian Consent Form to Participate in “Honouring our Stories: Aboriginal Primary Students’ Sense of Belonging in Public School Classrooms.”

Principal Investigator: Susan Leslie, Master’s student, Faculty of Education, Vancouver Island University, contact phone number: 250 792-0104

Research Supervisor: Rachel Moll, PhD, Faculty of Education, 250-753-3245 x2161

Purpose:

As part of of my Masters in Educational Leadership degree, I am doing a research project on the effect of talking circles rooted in Traditional values on the primary students’ self esteem. I am interested in how the use of talking circles following the Traditional values of: Listening, Mutual Respect, Speaking from the Heart and Kindness and Cooperation affect how the students feel about themselves.

I will write the results of this research in my masters thesis and, hopefully, it will be used to help improve school curriculum practices for Aboriginal Primary students. I am asking you to participate in this project because you are the parent or guardian of an Aboriginal Primary student who attended the program from September 2004 to June 2010.

What you are being asked to do:

You are being asked to participate in a talking circle that will follow Territory rules and will be led by Lynn Joseph. The question asked in the talking circle is: “How did the practice of daily talking circles using the Traditional values of Listening, Mutual Respect, Speaking from the Heart and Kindness and Cooperation affect how your child felt about him/herself as an individual and as a learner, when they were in the Aboriginal Kindergarten/1 program?” With your permission, I plan to videotape the talking circle so I will know what each person said. Please feel free to state your own name and experiences or stories, please try not to say things that will identify others. If you would like, you can have your name used when I publish your story in the research paper, but you don’t have to, if you don’t want.

If you want to look at how I wrote down your story, you can come to a meeting and tell me if you want me to make any changes before I publish it. If you want to come to this meeting, please write down your name and telephone number at the end of this consent form.
There are no known risks to you for taking part in this research.

Your participation in this research may offer others’, (teachers, administrators and students), some ideas about how using talking circles rooted in Traditional values might help improve Aboriginal Primary students’ sense of self as an individual and as a learner in the public school system. Your participation may provide an Aboriginal voice, which has not been included in the history of our country, for honouring our stories today.

Confidentiality:

If you choose you may be identified by name in any reports of the completed study. Otherwise, the information you provide will remain anonymous.

Study documents will be kept in a locked filing cabinet for 5 years at the research supervisor’s office. Electronic data and results of this study will be stored on a secured computer with restricted access (password-protected).

Contact for information about the study:

If you have any questions or desire further information with respect to this study, you may contact me at Ecole Puntledge Park Elementary, 250 334-4495 or at 250 792-0104.

Concerns about your treatment in the research: If you have any concerns about your treatment as a participant in this research, please contact the VIU Research Ethics Officer at reb@viu.ca or by telephone at (250) 753-3245 (ext. 2665).

Consent:

Your participation in this study is entirely voluntary and you may refuse to participate or withdraw from the study at any time and for any reason.

Your signature indicates that you consent to participate in this study and for the talking circles in which you are participating to be video-recorded. Only those who consent to be videotaped will be.

____________________________________________________________________________

Parent/Guardian name(s) (please print)       Your signature

Date________________________________________
If you **choose to** have your name used in the publishing of your story in this research paper,

Please sign below.

__________________________________

Parent/Guardian signature

**Contact Information** so you can come to a meeting to check over what I have written about your stories:

Phone number______________________   Email_______________________________

Please return a copy of these forms in the sealed envelope, to the **office at your child’s school**. They will forward them to the researcher, Susan Leslie via the inter-school mail.
Recruitment Form for
“Honouring our Stories: Aboriginal Primary Students’ Sense of Belonging in Public School Classrooms.”

Principal Investigator:  Susan Leslie, Faculty of Education, Vancouver Island University,
contact phone number:  250 792-0104

Purpose:
You are being asked to distribute the enclosed consent forms
to____________________________, who has attended the Comox Valley School District
Aboriginal Kindergarten Program between September 2004 and June 2010. (Known as the
Aboriginal Primary Program as of September 2010.) This project aims to conduct research on
the affect of talking circles rooted in Traditional values on the primary students’ self esteem.
Data will be collected from the Aboriginal Primary students and their parents who attended from
September 2004 to June 2010. The researcher is interested in how the use of talking circles
following the Traditional values of: Listening, Mutual Respect, Speaking from the Heart and
Kindness and Cooperation affect how the students feel about who they are as an individual and
as a learner. The results will be used to support future development of meaningful cultural
curriculum practices and to make recommendations for teachers, administrators, AEC members
and School Board members.

Distribution Procedures:
In this study, two different populations are being asked to participate in talking circles: the
students who attended the program from September 2004 to June 2010 and their parents. The
procedures for distribution of consent forms are as follows:

1. You will be asked to give the consent form package to the above mentioned student’s family.
2. Please ensure the package is given to a parent/guardian of the above mentioned student.
Contact for information about the study:

If you have any questions or desire further information with respect to this study, you may contact Susan Leslie at Ecole Puntledge Park Elementary, 250 334-4495.

Concerns about your treatment in the research: If you have any concerns about your treatment as a participant in this research, please contact the VIU Research Ethics Officer at reb@viu.ca or by telephone at (250) 753-3245 (ext. 2665).

Respectfully,

Susan Leslie

VIU Researcher
Talking Circle Protocol for
“Honouring our Stories: Aboriginal Primary Students’ Sense of Belonging in Public School Classrooms.”

Principal Investigator: Susan Leslie, Faculty of Education, Vancouver Island University, contact phone number: 250 792-0104

Research Supervisor: Rachel Moll, PhD, Faculty of Education, 250-753-3245 x2161

Purpose:
You are being asked to participate in one of two talking circles being held at Ecole Puntledge Park gym on Tuesday November 8th at 6:30 pm. I am interested in how the use of talking circles following the Traditional values of: Listening, Mutual Respect, Speaking from the Heart and Kindness and Cooperation affect how the students feel about who they are as an individual and as a learner. The results will be used to support future development of meaningful cultural curriculum practices and to make recommendations for teachers, administrators, AEC members and School Board members.

Talking Circle Procedures:
In this study, two different populations are being asked to participate in talking circles: the students who attended the program from September 2004 to June 2010 and their parents. The procedures for each talking circle will be as follows:

1. You will be asked to go to the appropriate talking circle, the student or parent/guardian circle.
   a) Talking sticks will be passed according to Territory protocols, (to the right of the facilitator.

   b) The facilitator will begin the talking circle by reading the research question:

   - Parents/Guardians' - “How did the practice of daily talking circles using the Traditional values of Listening, Mutual Respect, Speaking from the Heart and Kindness and Cooperation affect how your child felt about herself/himself as an individual an as a learner when they were in the Aboriginal Kindergarten/1 program?”
- Student - “How did the practice of daily talking circles using the Traditional values of Listening, Mutual Respect, Speaking from the Heart and Kindness and Cooperation affect how you felt about yourself when you were in the Aboriginal Kindergarten/1 program?”

c) The talking stick will be passed to the right after the question is read and each participant has the opportunity to speak to it until they have finished what they want to say.

d) After the talking stick has been passed to everyone in the circle once, the facilitator will ask if anyone else would like to speak. If so the talking stick will be passed to the right to that person, and when everyone is satisfied that they have finished speaking, the facilitator will close the circle and thank the participants for their words.

2. The talking circles will be videotaped to ensure accurate transcription.
3. You will be asked not to state any identifying information about others during data collection, yet you are free to state your own name and experiences.
4. Participation in these talking circles is voluntary and the participants may choose not to speak or to disengage from the process at any time.
5. Data will be transcribed and analyzed me.
6. You have the choice to have your name used in the transcription of your story. Please make sure you have signed the appropriate consent portion of yours and your child’s consent form in order that yours or your child’s names can be used. If your child does not want to be videotaped and/or have his/her name used in the publishing of this paper, your child’s wishes will be respected regardless of parental consent.

Your participation in this talking circle is entirely voluntary and you may refuse to participate or withdraw from the circle at any time and for any reason.
Debrief Letter for “Honouring our Stories: Aboriginal Primary Students’ Sense of Belonging in Public School Classrooms.”

Principal Investigator: Susan Leslie, Faculty of Education, Vancouver Island University, contact phone number: 250 792-0104

Purpose:

You are being asked to participate in this debriefing session because you indicated on your consent form that you would like to read your story transcribed by the researcher, prior to the publication of this research paper.

Debrief Procedures:

The procedures for debriefing will be as follows:

1. You will be asked to meet as a group at the district Aboriginal Education centre at, 665 16th Street, Courtenay, BC

2. You will be given a copy of your story to review, a highlighter pen and pencil to make any needed changes on your copy.

3. The researcher, Susan Leslie, will review your copy with you and make any needed changes to ensure your story’s authenticity.

4. When you have approved the editing of your story copy, please sign your copy at the bottom and return it to Susan Leslie.

Contact for information about the study:

If you cannot attend this debriefing session and would like to schedule one at a different time, you may contact Susan Leslie at Ecole Puntledge Park Elementary, 250 334-4495.

Respectfully,

Susan Leslie
VIU Researcher.