

Running head: ENGAGING THROUGH THE CIRCLE

Engaging Aboriginal Students through the Circle of Courage

Thesis

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Abstract

Aboriginal students continue to demonstrate a lack of engagement and success in their schooling in comparison to their non-Aboriginal classmates. Positive student-teacher relationships, focused on the teachings of the Circle of Courage, can help better engage our struggling Aboriginal learners. A mixed methods study was conducted to examine the data that was provided from both students and teachers by completing a survey about engaging Aboriginal students through the teachings of the Circle of Courage. The students that participated in the study were graduates of the Aboriginal Outreach (ABOUT) Program. Teacher participants came from two secondary schools in Nanaimo Ladysmith Public Schools (NLPS) and ranged in the teaching experience. Creating a strong sense of belonging through positive student-teacher relationships and providing teachers with more engagement strategies were successful strategies that allowed Aboriginal students to become more engaged in their learning. Teachers require more support in learning more about Aboriginal history and perspectives in order to successfully engage our struggling Aboriginal students. Results suggest a need for a clear model of ways to engage our struggling Aboriginal learners.

Dedication

The number four has sacred meaning to Aboriginal people and helps provide us with our direction. Standing in the middle of my circle of life, I have always been provided with four supportive directions. Words can do no justice to the unconditional love and support that I have felt from the four most powerful people I have ever met. You provided me with a Circle of Courage that has allowed me to finally be proud of who I am and where I came from. My amazing mother Maureen taught me what it feels like to belong and how to create a sense of belonging for everyone I come in contact with. My incredible father, Steve guided me to be able to demonstrate mastery and learn how to offer this opportunity to many others. My strong and powerful sister has helped show me how to be independent and I have enjoyed every minute of learning with you. Last and definitely not least, my loving wife and life partner Ricki, the generosity that you have and continue to provide helps inspire me daily to give back to our community that has offered us both so much. I love you all!

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Chapter One: Problem to be Investigated

If what we are doing for children is so good for them, why do they fight us so much?

- Roderick Durkin

Purpose of the Study

Across the province of British Columbia, the issue of engaging Aboriginal learners is a serious concern. This is not a new issue, but continues to be an area of alarm for educators, Aboriginal communities, and the Ministry of Education. Residential schools, stereotypes, racism, oppression and poverty are some of the issues that lead to a loss of engagement in education, poor academic results and a higher mortality rate for many Aboriginals (Toulouse, 2013). With so many Aboriginal students non-engaged, it appears that Canadian educators have not been able to fulfill the educational promises of Treaties 1 to 7 that were negotiated between the Queen's representatives and First Nations groups (Anuik, Battiste, & George, 2010).

Educational leaders know that when students are engaged, academic success is more likely to be possible. To lead a successful educational change in student engagement, leaders must engage in appreciative inquiry that includes being optimistic and constructive, while also being realistic and questioning (Quinn, 2004). This research was motivated by the assumption that many teachers truly do not understand *how* to engage our local Aboriginal learners in the classroom. Providing teachers with evidence of what these students need in order to be engaged, and by hearing it directly from the voices of Aboriginal students and their teaching colleagues, can help move learning forward for educators. This clarity will help to provide understanding for educators about *how* to create an engaging environment for Aboriginal learners.

Providing an engaging environment for all students in the classroom will provide Aboriginal learners with a more 'level playing field' where they can work among their counterparts in an environment that fosters equity among its learners.

As an Aboriginal teacher and student, I have had the opportunity to look at engagement through two very different lenses. During my elementary and secondary schools years as a student, I was not engaged by what was going on in the classroom and in school. I found that the culture in the classrooms and schools that I attended was not a welcoming one for a person of Aboriginal ancestry. I often lied about my culture and family history to better fit into the school community. Upon reflecting on my experience as a student, I cannot recall many positive relationships with my teachers. Now as a professional, I see and recognize the lack of engagement that continues to exist for many of our Aboriginal students. There are many who believe that providing Aboriginal content in the classroom will help engage Aboriginal learners, I too hold this belief; however, I also believe that a strong student-teacher relationship is the most important component in engaging our Aboriginal learners.

The specific purpose of this study was to analyze the relationship between Aboriginal student engagement in schools and positive student-teacher relationships. Further, this study highlights the connections between levels of engagement in Aboriginal learners and the teachings of the Circle of Courage model. According to the hypothesis of this study, I believed that findings would show that positive student-teacher relationships, focused on the teachings within the Circle of Courage model, might help to engage struggling Aboriginal learners. The results of this study will be used to advocate for the implementation and sustainment of leadership and teaching strategies that help

foster student-teacher relationships which can support struggling Aboriginal learners by increasing their levels of engagement.

Justification of the Study

Fredricks (2004) notes that, “the concept of school engagement has attracted growing interest as a way to ameliorate low levels of academic achievement, high levels of student boredom and disaffection and high dropout rates in urban areas” (p. 59). In the Report Card on Aboriginal Education in British Columbia, Cowley and Easton (2004) state that an Aboriginal student entering grade eight stands just slightly better than a one in five chance of completing all of their classes, and receiving their Dogwood Diploma on time. When looking at the success rates of non-Aboriginal students, their chances of completing all of their courses and receiving their Dogwood Diploma are three times higher.

Cowley and Easton (2004) identify that the the BC Ministry of Education’s Foundations Skills Assessment (FSA) failure rate for grade seven Aboriginal students is more than double that of their non-Aboriginal classmates. The question that many continue to ask is what are the reasons for Aboriginal students having less success than their non-Aboriginal counterparts in school? Lack of engagement is likely one of these factors.

Nanaimo-Ladysmith’s Satisfaction Survey (2013) shows us that in grade four, 67 % of Aboriginal students believe that they are being taught content about Aboriginal peoples in Canada, but this number then drops to 0% in grade seven. Is part of the cause for lower results and disengagement in learning for Aboriginal learners due to the lack of Aboriginal content in the curriculum? When analyzing the age of student drop out,

assumptions can be made that these students lost engagement in their learning long before they finally dropped out of school (Balfanz, Herzog, & Maciver, 2007). Martin Brokenleg, co-author of *Reclaiming Youth at Risk* and Circle of Courage model, believes that “students usually decide in grade seven whether they are going to graduate from high school or not” (personal communication, November 1, 2013). Knowing how critical engagement is for students at the grade seven level, educators need to ensure that curriculum is relevant and engaging so that youth will make the decision to complete their high school education. In addition, high school educators need to create opportunities for adolescent Aboriginal students to find success in school, so that even if they have made up their mind to drop out, they are given a reason to change this mindset.

Aboriginal ways of learning, such as the Circle of Courage, which focus on having conversations with students and are aligned with the values that Aboriginal students hold within many of their cultures are one possible way to engage Aboriginal students. “Integrating Aboriginal content into the regular school curriculum increases the likelihood that Aboriginal students will achieve higher academic success” (Tait, 2010, p.7). The Circle of Courage model provides educators with a symbol that was derived from Aboriginal people’s tribal teachings that can be used each day to help improve the engagement of our Aboriginal students. The model encourages educators to nurture each of their students by following the four parts of the Circle of Courage: creating a sense of belonging, mastery, independence, and generosity (Brokenleg, Brendtro, & Van Bockern, 2002).

The Circle of Courage model embodies four core values for engaging and nurturing students: The Spirit of Belonging, The Spirit of Mastery, The Spirit of Independence and

the Spirit of Generosity (Brokenleg et al., 2002). The Spirit of Belonging allows for all students and children to feel nurtured through relationships of trust. The role of adults is to not only serve as instructors that teach to the curriculum of subject, but to show each student that they belong and are loved. The Spirit of Mastery shows students that they can succeed and fosters their thirst for learning. The goal is to allow each student to develop cognitive, physical, social and spiritual competence. The Spirit of Independence encourages students to feel that they have the power to make decisions. Many Aboriginal communities do not put pressure on children to become independent at an early age, but encourage them to learn respect and values from their elders before they are depended on to make decisions. The Spirit of Generosity shows students that they have a purpose in the school and in life. One constant in Aboriginal communities has been that the highest virtue is to be generous and unselfish. The teachings that the Circle of Courage model support, keeps Aboriginal students engaged in learning as they are able to stay connected to the traditional teachings of their culture. Thus, the current study aimed to examine the connection between student engagement and positive student-teacher relationships (based in the Circle of Courage model).

Research Question and Hypothesis

The question inspiring this present research is: how can positive student-teacher relationships, focused on the teachings of the Circle of Courage, help engage our struggling Aboriginal learners? My hypothesis of this study is that positive student-teacher relationships, focused on the teachings within the Circle of Courage, help to engage our struggling Aboriginal learners. It is also hypothesized that teachers surveyed in the study will show little knowledge of the Circle of Courage model and how to

successfully engage Aboriginal learners. I believed that engaged Aboriginal students would report that they have a positive student-teacher relationship inside their educational community.

Definition of Terms

The word Aboriginal is used throughout this study and includes First Nations, Metis and Inuit people of Canada. However varying terms such as Native, Indian or Indigenous, were used by the authors whose work contributed to this research and were included so that the integrity of their words would not be lost. These words should be considered synonyms for Aboriginal. When referring to student engagement, it occurs when students make a psychological investment in learning; showing an internal motivation to learn. The teachers in this study are someone holding a current teaching certificate in the province of British Columbia, and teaches at either John Barsby Community School or Nanaimo District Secondary School within Nanaimo Ladysmith Public Schools (NLPS). Struggling learners are students who are not meeting expectations in school and are not engaged in their school work. The students that participated in this study were all of Aboriginal ancestry and were former students of the ABOUT (Aboriginal Outreach) Program within NLPS. The ABOUT Program is a Learning Alternatives program that provides an innovative learning environment for students (who had previously left school or who were struggling) to complete each of their courses required for graduation with a strong focus on traditional Aboriginal teachings. The program is now in its seventh year of operation and operates out of Nanaimo District Secondary School (NDSS). Positive relationship is another term used throughout the study and refers to a connection or bond between two people, which

includes mutual respect and understanding of each other's values. The Circle of Courage is a model that was derived from tribal teachings; it was used to promote positive youth development based on the universal principle that to be emotionally healthy all youth need a sense of belonging, mastery independence and generosity. This philosophy emerged from the collaboration of Martin Brokenleg and Larry K. Brendtro.

Brief Overview of Study

This study examined how positive teacher-student relationships, focused on teachings within the Circle of Courage model, can promote engagement for struggling Aboriginal learners. Both quantitative and qualitative data were collected using a mixed-methods research approach. Former Aboriginal students and current teachers were surveyed, using open and closed-ended questions in an attempt to collect meaningful data to understand what best engages Aboriginal learners. The former student participants in the study were past students of the ABOUT Program in the Nanaimo-Ladysmith Public Schools (NLPS) District.

The ABOUT Program is an innovative approach to service delivery for vulnerable Aboriginal students aged 12-19 in NLPS. The program's personalized learning approach allows learners, whom otherwise leave the system, the chance to stabilize in a supportive atmosphere that allows them to have success and build self-esteem and confidence. ABOUT focuses on relationships with each student and their family, relevant and meaningful learning and restorative practices that help each student create a sense of self through a strong focus on Aboriginal culture and athletics. As the researcher, I looked for evidence of trends between Aboriginal student engagement and positive student-teacher relationships by examining students who were a product of teachings from the

Circle of Courage model. The study also investigated teachers and their struggles and successes in engaging struggling Aboriginal students.

Chapter Two: Background and Review of Related Literature

Be related, somehow, to every one you know.

-Ella Deloria

Before European contact Aboriginal children learned from their parents, their extended family, the community in which they lived and, most importantly, their Elders. Generations of Aboriginal people learned to value learning from people who are connected to them emotionally, but this started to change upon European contact. A sense of belonging within a learning environment is something that is valued by many Aboriginal people. Anything less than experiencing learning through connection and belonging would, of course, equate to disengagement for Aboriginal students, as there is no horizontal connectedness, which is learning that enables learners to connect ideas taught in the classroom to their wider community (Dumont, Istance, & Benavides, 2010).

The concept of engaging Aboriginal learners in a school and classroom is a topic that has become rich in literature, but not in empirical research. When trying to narrow down empirical research to examine positive student-teacher relationships that focused on the concepts of the Circle of Courage and student engagement, some overarching themes began to appear. This study was driven by research that was focused on student-teacher relationships, each of the four concepts of the Circle of Courage (belonging, mastery, independence and generosity), and engagement of Aboriginal learners. The literature being reviewed was grouped into the following themes: resiliency in students, creating a sense of belonging for students, the inclusion of Aboriginal concepts in the curriculum, and programs that engage Aboriginal students.

Resiliency in Students

It is not surprising that students who face the greatest risk of dropping out are those who have never had a positive relationship with a teacher (Brokenleg et al., 2002). How can these at risk students start to engage and start to show resiliency? Feinstein, Baartman, Buboltz, Sonnichsen, and Solomon's (2008) study addressed the problem focused around the fact that there can be two groups of vulnerable children, with evidence of similar backgrounds or adversities, yet one may show resilient behaviours while the other does not. The purpose of their study was to investigate the factors that may encourage or impede adolescent boys in their ability to demonstrate resilient behaviours. Feinstein et al. (2008) tried to identify the positive attributes existing for each male juvenile with intent to establish which approaches were successful in fostering resiliency. In the study, resiliency was defined as "the human capacity and ability to face, overcome, be strengthened by, and even be transformed by experiences of adversity" (Cesarone, 1999, p. 28). The study used Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory to identify resiliency. This theory is "an approach to understanding human development within the context of the systems of relationships that form in the individual's environment" (Feinstein et al., 2008, p. 94).

Feinstein et al. (2008) presented qualitative data, which was collected by means of interviewing. The researchers established interview questions and then individually interviewed the 18 participants. In development of the interview questions, both Bronfenbrenner's (1986) Ecological Systems Theory and the Search Institute (2004) Risk and Resiliency Theory, were used in an attempt to create meaningful questions. Some examples of interview questions in Feinstein et al.'s (2008) study were: "Who are your role models? Why? Do you have plans for the future? Do people feel safe in your

community (outside the facility)?" (p. 98-99). Interview data were then collected, and analyzed by researchers. Findings in Feinstein et al.'s (2008) study showed the necessary qualities needed within a community, in order to foster resiliency for vulnerable youth. The characteristics identified were, adequate bonding time with an adult in the program, as well as the need for empathy practices to be promoted within the community. These results support my current research as they provide support for the need of positive relationships to take place between student and an adult mentor. This research also helped me to identify meaningful interview questioning techniques which were applied to my survey design for examining vulnerable Aboriginal youth.

Social Emotional Learning plays a role in engagement and resiliency. Beland's (2007) study explains how Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) improves both engagement and resiliency. "SEL is the process by which people develop the skills to recognize and manage emotions and form positive relationships, solve problems that arise, motivate themselves to accomplish a goal, make responsible decisions, and avoid risky behavior" (Beland, 2007, p. 29). Fostering SEL environments promotes students to demonstrate the spirit of each of the four quadrants of the Circle of Courage (Belonging, Mastery, Independence, and Generosity). Specifically, allowing students to develop a sense of belonging and the ability to demonstrate contributions to their community increases the resilience and self-esteem in adolescents (Lloyd, 2001).

Creating a Sense of Belonging for Students

Many Aboriginal communities share the belief that belonging to a community is one of the most significant elements of one's identity. Standing Bear (1978) shared that each Aboriginal child belonged to both their family through blood, but also they belonged

to their community, which was often their band. “It was the duty of all adults to serve as teachers for younger persons” (Brokenleg et al., 2002, p. 46). When in the school building, positive relationships between staff and students help one feel as though they belong. Do schools create a sense of belonging for all learners? And if a student doesn’t feel a sense of belonging can they be engaged in their learning? Johnson’s (2009) research examined the sense of alienation that high schools can foster for many students. The study suggested that 40-60% of high school students are consistently unengaged, chronically inattentive and bored (Johnson, 2009). Johnson (2009) provided an analysis on the relationship between psychological measures of belongingness and motivation. The study illustrated the possibility and significance of supplying adolescent students with a sense of belonging.

The question that drove Johnson’s research was do levels of belongingness differ in relation to school context? Her hypothesis was that how students feel about and do in school, is in large part, determined by their relationships with teachers. This study used mixed methods research with questionnaires, interviews and observations. The research used by Johnson was similar to the approach that I took as I attempted to answer my research question. Johnson used interviews, which allowed for voices of both students and teachers to be heard regarding their ideas and thoughts on their school climate and experience. This qualitative data was justified to support and strengthen the quantitative findings.

The findings from Johnson’s (2009) study supported her hypothesis. The results at the non-traditional school had more teachers that supported the supportive descriptions than compared with the traditional school. On average, the students at the non-traditional

school felt that two or three teachers at their school showed an interest in them, had an interest in student problems or futures, cared for and motivated students. Students of the traditional schools mostly reported that no teachers or only one teacher showed caring or concern for students. Students in the non-traditional schools reported higher levels of a sense of belonging, acceptance, respect, inclusion, and support from the educational community. The non-traditional schools in her study resembled the customary Aboriginal belief that “children were trained to see themselves as related to virtually all with whom they had regular contact” (Brokenleg et al., 2002, p. 46). The traditional schools examined followed the traditional European approach to education where there is very little emphasis on establishing a positive student-teacher relationship.

This study was able to give students a voice and created opportunities for them to participate in conversations and reflections of their learning. The study moved knowledge forward for educators to better understand the social and emotional needs in our school communities. Johnson’s (2009) study helped me define the characteristics of a positive student-teacher relationship. Her findings helped support my hypothesis and assisted with formulating meaningful survey questions for both students and teachers for my research. In addition to positive student-teacher relationships, the inclusion of Aboriginal content into the curriculum can help improve the success of Aboriginal student success (Tait, 2010).

The Inclusion of Aboriginal Concepts in Curriculum

It is clear that Aboriginal students are not succeeding at the same rate as non-Aboriginal students in BC. Could positive student-teacher relationships and a curriculum that is rich in Aboriginal content and the history of the traditional territory that each

school resides help better engage our struggling Aboriginal students? The research question driving Tait's (2010) study was "what are the challenges, as perceived by teachers (identified by gender, years of teaching experience and grade level taught), to integrating Aboriginal content across the B.C. curriculum?" (p. 2).

Tait (2010) used a survey to retrieve quantitative data from 87 out of a possible 800 teachers employed by School District 68 in Nanaimo, BC, Canada. The teachers in the sample varied by gender, years of teaching experience and grade level taught. The survey's purpose was to gain information about teachers' perceptions of challenges to integrating Aboriginal content into the curriculum and to obtain demographic information. The survey included eight statements that reflected challenges, which teachers may perceive, to integrating Aboriginal content to their class curriculum. Each statement was accompanied by a five-point Likert scale (numeral 1 represented Strongly Disagree and 5 represented Strongly Agree). At the end of the survey there was an open-ended question to elicit information that was not addressed in the previous questions. The Likert scale prompts used were similar to what I used when surveying staff and students to help answer my research question: how can positive student-teacher relationships, focused on the teachings of the Circle of Courage, help engage our struggling Aboriginal learners?

Tait's (2010) findings in this study confirmed that access to resources and knowledge of Aboriginal cultures presented hurdles to the inclusion of Aboriginal content in the BC Curriculum by teachers in School District 68. The data revealed no substantial differences between elementary and secondary teachers regarding the challenges to integration; both found the lack of resources to be a challenge. Secondary teachers indicated a greater lack of knowledge of Aboriginal cultures than did elementary

teachers. The 11% return rate of those who participated in the survey may be looked upon as a weakness of the study. This weakness may be a result of the fact that surveys were sent to each school with instructions for the administration to deliver to staff. This method did not allow the researcher to have full control over the way the survey was explained and distributed to teachers. This particular flaw helped me when planning how I was going to administer surveys to teachers and students, as I wanted full control over the explanation, distribution and collection of the surveys filled out by staff and students.

This study presented some of the issues that may be holding back our Aboriginal learners from their non-Aboriginal counterparts. The review of this study has helped me identify some limitations that were faced by another School District Aboriginal teacher when researching to improve the overall success of our Aboriginal students. Tait's (2010) Chapter 5 included: Recommendations for Practice and Recommendations for Future Research. These emphasized that empirical research around Aboriginal student achievement and engagement is lacking in School District 68 and around the province of British Columbia. Tait (2010) suggested that more is required in order to enable positive change among our struggling Aboriginal learners. I share this suggestion and hope that by surveying both staff and students of Nanaimo Ladysmith Public Schools staff will learn more about strategies to help engage our struggling Aboriginal learners. In order to learn of other ways to engage struggling Aboriginal students, examining successful programs and projects in BC could help identify strategies for schools and staff.

Programs that Engage Aboriginal Students

The Canadian Education Association identifies that students need social, institutional and intellectual engagement to have success engaging in school and their

learning (Dunleavy, Willms, Milton, & Friesen, 2012). If Aboriginal graduation rates are to improve, so must the quality of teaching and learning strategies for disengaged Aboriginal learners. Engaging Aboriginal learners in the classroom requires adapting teaching strategies, and/or content to make it meaningful to the learner. However, in order for educators to involve Aboriginal learners, the learner must have, first, the courage to succeed, and that is brought through the teachings of the Circle of Courage model (Brokenleg et al., 2002). Educators need to develop a better understanding of the values that Aboriginal learners hold, and what they need emotionally in order to be engaged in their learning and find success within their educational setting.

Despite the lower success rates in comparison to their non-Aboriginal counterparts, there are some successful Aboriginal education programs in British Columbia that are helping close the gap. Nielsen's (2010) research examined the Learning for Understanding through Culturally-inclusive Imaginative Development (LUCID) project and its ability to engage Aboriginal students. LUCID was initiated when Dr. Mark Fettes won a 5-year grant from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC). The goal of this project was to create a culturally inclusive Aboriginal curriculum that used imaginative education to help improve the educational gap between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students. Imaginative education attempts to engage students emotionally in their learning through connections to human feelings and images (Egan, 2005). This project shared a number of similarities to the ABOUT Program in Nanaimo Ladysmith Public Schools (NLPS), which has the highest graduation rate of Aboriginal students out of any school in NLPS.

The LUCID project was driven by community collaboration which included Simon Fraser University (SFU), three First Nations communities in BC: Sto:lo, Haida and Ts'msyen and the three school districts that reside on their traditional territory. Nielsen (2010) used a mixed qualitative research approach to evaluate the LUCID project. "Given that LUCID had collected no real base-line data other than the broader literature on First Nations education, I needed a sympathetic means of evaluating its successes and difficulties, and of assessing what context each party was bringing to the project" (Nielsen, 2010, p. 415). Nielsen collected data on eight separate school site visits to each of the three BC school districts involved in the LUCID project: Chilliwack, Queen Charlotte Islands, and Prince Rupert. These visits took place over a six week period in 2006 and follow up interviews were conducted in 2007. Data collection was divided into three categories: interviewing, observation, and documentation.

Out of the 20 teachers that were involved in the LUCID project, Nielsen interviewed 14 of them. The backgrounds, belief systems and interests of the teachers were diverse, but there was a common theme of wanting to better engage all students (Nielsen, 2010). Four out of eleven principals involved were interviewed. Many principals reported that there were some teachers who were disconnected from their students and struggled to build a positive relationship with them (Nielsen, 2010). Interviews with LUCID project leaders and parents were quite positive about the intentions and efforts of LUCID.

When examining Nielsen's research, there were a number of overarching themes. Collaborating and planning allowed teachers to share their successes and challenges and also motivate and inspire each other as well as other classroom teachers. The

development of the LUCID community helped move teachers out of isolation and acquire skills that allowed them to better engage both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students. Working with members of each of the local nations allowed all school district staff to learn more about Aboriginal culture and the protocols that educators could use to better engage struggling learners. The loss of language and the fact that many Aboriginal children have not learned the English language very well demonstrates the need for language development for students entering school and also some parents. One of the Aboriginal teachers involved in the LUCID program believed that this has occurred because children never learned their traditional language like the generations before. Since the generations before them didn't understand English very well, they weren't able to instruct their children very well and the issue continues to snowball and now their traditional language threatens to become extinct (Nielsen, 2010).

Examining studies within the four themes of: resiliency in students, creating a sense of belonging for students, the inclusion of Aboriginal concepts in the curriculum, and programs that engage Aboriginal students, helped me to see the lack of empirical research that currently exists on the topic of engaging Aboriginal learners. The studies I observed showed the importance of each of the four concepts of the Circle of Courage model and how they can assist in engaging our struggling Aboriginal learners. We as a community of educators need to study some of the traditional Aboriginal philosophies around education and work together to bridge the gap that currently exists between our Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students. "We should never consider education a luxury; it is a necessity, especially for children in poor and minority communities, so that they can someday enjoy a high quality of life" (Muhammad, 2009, p. 8).

Chapter Three: Procedures and Methods

Are we here to teach, or are we here to ensure that our students learn?

-Dr. Chris Weber

Research Design

This research was designed to examine how positive student-teacher relationships, focused on the teachings of the Circle of Courage, can help engage our struggling Aboriginal students and other students who have lost their connection to the classroom. The hope of the researcher is that not only can this work help engage struggling learners, but that it can also help better engage those that may not be facing academic struggles in their learning, but who are not actively engaged in their learning. Lack of engagement and low graduation rates of Aboriginal students in Nanaimo Ladysmith Public Schools (NLPS) and across the province of British Columbia illustrate that our current approach to educating our Aboriginal students is not working well enough. This study aimed to examine the beliefs of former Aboriginal students and teachers about the connections between positive student-teacher relationships and Aboriginal student success. This research used both quantitative and qualitative data to help show the role that positive student-teacher relationships, focused on the values of the Circle of Courage, could play in engaging Aboriginal students in NLPS. Surveys for former Aboriginal students and teachers allowed participants to respond to both closed-ended statements and open-ended questions.

Sample

This study took place in two of the secondary schools in NLPS. These two schools were chosen because they have the highest enrolment of Aboriginal students in NLPS. The researcher used a non-random, systematic sampling method, by examining

two schools that reside on the traditional territory of the Snuneymuxw First Nation. Former Aboriginal students (belonging to a wide range of Nations, not just Snuneymuxw) who had attended and graduated from the ABOUT Program within NLPS in 2014, as well as teachers from the two secondary schools, were asked to complete a survey to help share their thoughts and experiences on the issue of engaging struggling Aboriginal students through positive student-teacher relationships.

The ABOUT Program is a full-time Learning Alternatives program that focusses on the traditional teachings of a number of different nations and allows students to complete all of their high school courses with one teacher, in one classroom. The one teacher, one classroom approach allows for students and teachers to form a strong and positive relationship where the student can feel a sense of belonging, demonstrate their mastery in a variety of different ways, are encouraged to express their independence, and learn the value of generosity; each of which are the teachings of the Circle of Courage.

During the time of the study, there were 20 former students that graduated from the ABOUT Program (January 2014). Each of these students were students that had been withdrawn or dropped out of school at one point during their education path. Each of the students attended the ABOUT Program and graduated from the program with their Dogwood Diploma. There were 16 of the former ABOUT high school graduates that participated in the study, giving an 80% representation of former graduates.

The researcher attended two staff meetings, one at each school, to present his research. Out of the 50 teachers at the two secondary schools (15 at one school and 35 at the other) that were attending the staff meeting when he presented his research study, 22 of them completed the survey. Since he did not know the names of the teachers that were

present and those that were not present, he was unable to put surveys in the mailboxes of the teachers that did not attend the staff meeting. After speaking with the administrators of both schools, they informed the researcher that all full-time teachers were present at both staff meetings. The 44% return rate of those teachers that were present at staff meetings, gave a strong representation for the teachers. The teachers that participated were divided into grouping of years of teaching experience (0-5 years of experience, 5-10 years of experience, 10-15 years of experience and 15 + years of experience).

Instruments Used

Two different five-point Likert scale surveys were used (one for former students and one for teachers). The student survey (Appendix A) included 13 close-ended statements and two open-ended questions around positive student-teacher relationships, focused on the Circle of Courage model. The close-ended statements had students compare their experience between mainstream high school and their time in the ABOUT Program. The statements were all focused around the four quadrants of the Circle of Courage. The two open-ended questions allowed students to share their thoughts on Aboriginal education in NLPS and any ways that the Circle of Courage helped engage them as a student. The teacher survey (Appendix B) included eight close-ended statements and two open ended questions. The close-ended statements asked teachers to share their thoughts on using the teaching of the Circle of Courage to engage their Aboriginal learners. The open-ended questions had teachers share their current thoughts on Aboriginal education supports in NLPS and an opportunity to share success story of an Aboriginal student that was a result of a positive student-teacher relationship.

Each survey was attached to a research study information sheet (refer to Appendices C and D). The research study information sheet highlighted the purpose of the study, explained that participation was voluntary, explained that all participation was completely anonymous and that the completion of the survey indicated free and informed consent to participate in the research study. Statements and questions focused on traditional Aboriginal child nurturing philosophies emphasized in the Circle of Courage and the students' level of engagement in school. Johnson's (2009) study assisted the researcher in formulating meaningful survey questions for both students and teachers for his research study. Her philosophies helped the researcher to define the characteristics of a positive student-teacher relationship, which led to the development of questions that could best reflect identification of these relationships for the student participants. Questions were simple and direct so that students could answer how important each value was to them specifically. For example, *Positive student-teacher relationships are important for keeping Aboriginal students engaged.*

For the close-ended statements the numeral 1 represented Strongly Disagree and numeral 5 represented Strongly Agree. "A high point value on a positively stated item would indicate a positive attitude and a high total score on the test would be indicative of a positive attitude" (Gay, Mills, & Airasian, 2012, p.130). The close-ended statements provided the researcher with quantitative/numerical data, but these data can still be considered descriptive (Mills, 2014). Following the close-ended statements, there were two open-ended questions that were intended to provide information that was not addressed in the statements. It gave the participants of the study an opportunity to demonstrate what their thoughts and opinions were on the topic of the study. An example

of the questions used were, *what are your current thoughts on Aboriginal education supports offered to struggling Aboriginal students in NLPS?* The ability to not rely solely on one source of data, or on one stakeholder group, demonstrates the use of triangulation which increases validity (Wolcott, 1988).

Procedures Followed

Dr. Martin Brokenleg, co-creator of the Circle of Courage, gave his verbal consent and support to share and examine the teachings of the Circle of Courage (personal communication, November 20, 2013). Snuneymuxw First Nation provided their support for this research to take place on their traditional territory (personal communication, May 1, 2014). Permission was obtained by the Vancouver Island University Ethics Board in August 2014. The superintendent of Nanaimo Ladysmith Public Schools gave his approval to conduct the study in September 2014. Tillicum Lelum Aboriginal Friendship Center welcomed the idea for the researcher to present the purpose of study in an attempt to recruit former student participants in September 2014. The student presentation was given in the Neutral Zone (a Tillicum Lelum Aboriginal Friendship Center building), which is a place where former ABOUT graduates frequently spend time. Both school administrators provided consent to the researcher to speak at the second staff meeting of the year to present the survey and research information sheet in October 2014.

Over a two-month period in the Fall of 2014, 16 former ABOUT students and 22 teachers completed a written survey. The former students were recruited from posters and by a presentation held at Tillicum Lelum Aboriginal Friendship Center's Neutral Zone in September 2014 and given the opportunity to participate in this study. Surveys

and research study information sheets (Appendices A and C) were distributed and asked to be returned to Nanaimo District Secondary School. Envelopes were provided that included the school address and prepaid postage. The teacher surveys and research study information sheet were explained in detail (see Appendices B and D) by the researcher at school staff meetings and left for the teachers to complete at a convenient time. All participants were informed that participation was voluntary and anonymous. Completed surveys were returned to a locked filing cabinet at the school for the researcher to pick up, one week after they were presented to potential participants. The data were analyzed and organized for each close-ended statement and open-ended question.

Validity

The researcher took many precautions to minimize threats to the internal validity of the study. The researcher followed the research information sheet that was posted and distributed when speaking to former students (Appendix A). When explaining the survey and research information sheet to teachers at the school staff meetings, he followed the research information sheet thoroughly (Appendix C). Teacher participants may have had negative beliefs about Aboriginal students that could threaten the internal validity. To help minimize these threats, during all recruitment presentations the researcher emphasized the importance of the study, that all responses to the statements and questions would assist the study, and that the study would provide recommendations to better support both students and teachers. Each of the participants that volunteered to participate in the research were given a one week period to complete the survey and review the research information sheet in a non-threatening environment of their choice.

The researcher tried to improve the external validity of the study by addressing each of the following characteristics of the study: credibility, transferability, dependability and conformability, to examine the validity of his qualitative action research (Guba, 1981). Peer debriefing provided the researcher with the opportunity to test his growing insights. In collaboration with colleagues during Professional Learning Community (PLC) sessions at work, and with peers within the researcher's Masters cohort, he was able to broaden his perspective by hearing their experiences with struggling Aboriginal learners within their classrooms. This exercise helped to improve the credibility of the study and determine where to start in building a meaningful survey for my teacher participants.

To assist with minimizing limitations of the survey, the peer debriefing process also allowed the researcher to simplify the structure, explanation and content of the survey and research information sheet. Factors such as font, size, language, participant information and clarity of both the survey and research information sheet were taken into consideration. Triangulation was used to check the credibility and conformability by collecting information in both close-ended statements and open-ended questions answered by former students and current teachers (Wolcott, 1988). The researcher collected and presented detailed and descriptive data that permitted comparison of the sample to other samples, thus improving the transferability of the research (Guba, 1981). Further, triangulation was used by attaining more than one stakeholder response, which contributed to increasing the credibility of the study.

Another possible limitation to the study could be that the researcher was the former teacher of the student participants. There could be internal pressure on the student

participants to skew responses to the questions knowing that the researcher (their former teacher) would be reading the results. In an attempt to minimize this limitation former student participants were assured that the survey results were anonymous, and envelopes were provided with Nanaimo District Secondary School as the address. The researcher's experience with the ABOUT Program also speaks to the credibility of the study. While his experience influenced how he interpreted the results, the researcher also knows the program well, knows what kinds of questions are appropriate to ask about and can interpret responses based on his experiences with the program.

Analysis Techniques

The data from the former student and teacher surveys were analysed in a variety of ways. Mean, mode and variance were calculated for close-ended statements and presented in tables. Results for each close-ended statement were compared to each other for whether participants strongly agreed or strongly disagreed. For the teacher surveys, sub groupings were created based on years of teaching experience. The open-ended questions in both surveys were coded for recurring themes. The findings were first presented in a quantitative manner and followed by a presentation of qualitative data that showed both similarities and differences between the student and teacher participants.

Chapter Four: Findings and Results

We must look on children in need not as problems but as individuals with potential to share if they are given the opportunity.

-Archbishop Desmond Tutu

The findings and results of this research study answered the question how can positive student-teacher relationships, focused on the teachings of the Circle of Courage, help engage our struggling Aboriginal learners? Data were generated from two separate surveys that were distributed to Aboriginal students in Nanaimo Ladysmith Public Schools (NLPS) who had graduated from the ABOUT Program, and teachers from two secondary schools in NLPS that reside on the traditional territory of the Snuneymuxw First Nation. There were a total of 16 student surveys returned out of a possible 20 which indicates a return rate of 80%. Among the teacher surveys, there were 22 surveys returned out of a possible 50, giving a 44% return rate. The following data reflect the responses to both the student and teacher surveys (including responses to the five-point Likert scale and the open ended questions).

The teacher survey (Appendix B) asked teachers to indicate their level of agreement with the following eight statements:

1. Positive student-teacher relationships are important for keeping Aboriginal students engaged.
2. Aboriginal students feel a sense of belonging in my classroom.
3. Aboriginal students feel competent in my classroom.
4. Aboriginal students are encouraged to express independence in my classroom.
5. Aboriginal students have the opportunity to participate in community and express generosity in my classroom.

6. All of my Aboriginal students are engaged in the classroom.
7. I need more information on *how* to engage my Aboriginal students.
8. I use the 'Circle of Courage' model.

The overall mean scores, mode scores and variance for each closed-ended statement of the teacher survey are represented in Table 4.1 where the means and modes can range from 1.0 (Strongly Disagree) to 5.0 (Strongly Agree).

Table 4.1

Overall Mean, Mode and Variance Scores for Teacher Surveys

Statement	n	Mean	Mode	Variance
1	22	4.9	5	0.1
2	22	4.5	4	1.0
3	22	3.7	3	0.9
4	22	4.1	5	0.8
5	22	3.7	3	1.2
6	22	3.0	3	0.9
7	22	4.3	5	1.1
8	22	2.5	1	2.5

Table 4.1 illustrates the highest mean score was 4.9 for Statement One: Positive student-teacher relationships are important for keeping Aboriginal students engaged. The lowest mean score of the eight statements was 2.5 for Statement Eight: I use the ‘Circle of Courage’ model. The variance of Statement 8 is high because most respondents either agreed or disagreed where three respondents selected strongly agree and nine respondents selected strongly disagree. Table 4.2 displays mean scores according to number of years of teaching experience.

Table 4.2

Mean Scores According to Years of Teaching Experience for Teacher Surveys

Statement	0-5 yrs n=3	5-10 yrs n=6	10-15 yrs n=3	15+ yrs n=10
1	5.0	5.0	5.0	4.8
2	3.3	3.8	4.0	4.0
3	2.7	3.7	3.3	4.1
4	4.0	4.2	4.3	4.0
5	3.3	3.8	3.3	4.0
6	2.0	3.2	3.0	3.1
7	4.7	4.3	4.7	3.8
8	1.7	3.5	1.7	2.4

Table 4.2 displays the mean scores of each of the close-ended statements on the teacher surveys according to their years of teaching experience. The highest mean score for teachers with 0-5, 5-10, and 10-15 years teaching experience was 5.0 on Statement One: Positive student-teacher relationships are important for keeping Aboriginal students engaged. Statement One was also the highest mean score for teachers with 15+ years of teaching experience, with a mean score of 4.8. The greatest difference among the four groupings of teaching experience occurred in Statement Eight: I use the 'Circle of

Courage' model. The mean score of those with 0-5 years of teaching experience was 1.7, 5-10 years was 3.5, 10-15 years was 1.7, and 15+ years was 2.4. There were also notable differences in the mean scores for Statement Three: Aboriginal students feel competent in my classroom. The mean score of those with 0-5 years of teaching experience was 2.7, 5-10 years was 3.7, 10-15 years was 3.3, and 15+ years was 4.1.

Students were asked to indicate their agreement with the following thirteen statements on the student surveys:

1. Positive student-teacher relationships are important for keeping Aboriginal students engaged.
2. As a student in mainstream high school, I felt a sense of belonging in my classroom.
3. As a student in the ABOUT Program, I felt a sense of belonging in my classroom.
4. As a student in mainstream high school, I felt competent in my classroom.
5. As a student in the ABOUT Program, I felt competent in my classroom.
6. As a student in mainstream high school, I was encouraged to express independence in my classroom.
7. As a student in the ABOUT Program, I was encouraged to express independence in my classroom.
8. As a student in mainstream high school, I had the opportunity to participate in community service and show generosity in my classroom.
9. As a student in the ABOUT Program, I had the opportunity to participate in community service and show generosity in my classroom.
10. I was engaged during my time in mainstream high school.
11. I was engaged during my time in the ABOUT Program.

12. Teachers need more support and education to help engage Aboriginal students.

13. The Circle of Courage concept helped engage me in school.

Table 4.3 represents a summary of the data received from the five-point Likert scale portion of the student surveys. The overall mean scores, mode scores and variance for each closed-ended statement of the student survey are represented in Table 4.3 with potential means and modes from 1.0 (Strongly Disagree) to 5.0 (Strongly Agree).

Table 4.3

Overall Mean, Mode and Variance Scores for Student Surveys

Statement	n	Mean	Mode	Variance
1	16	4.7	5	0.4
2	16	2.1	3	0.9
3	16	4.6	5	0.3
4	16	2.3	3	0.9
5	16	4.5	5	0.4
6	16	1.9	1	1.5
7	16	4.4	5	0.7
8	16	2.2	1	1.2
9	16	4.1	4	0.8
10	16	1.8	1	0.7
11	16	4.3	4 & 5	0.5
12	16	4.6	5	0.4
13	16	3.9	5	1.6

Table 4.3 illustrates that the highest mean score of the students was a 4.7 on the statement: “Positive student-teacher relationships are important for keeping Aboriginal students engaged”. Two other statements had a high mean were: “As a student in the ABOUT Program, I felt a sense of belonging in my classroom” and “Teachers need more support and education to help engage Aboriginal students.”

Table 4.4

Comparison of Mean Scores between Mainstream High School (MSH) and the ABOUT Program (AP) for Student Surveys

Statements	Mean (MSH)	Mean (AP)
2-3 Belonging	2.1	4.6
4-5 Competence/Mastery	2.3	4.5
6-7 Independence	1.9	4.4
8-9 Generosity	2.2	4.1
10-11 Engagement	1.8	4.3

Table 4.4 represents the significant differences between experiences in mainstream high schools and their time as a student in the ABOUT Program. The largest differences between the two types of schooling were in experiencing belonging, demonstrating attendance and their overall engagement.

Qualitative data directly followed both the teacher and student five-point Likert scale ranking surveys. There were two open-ended questions asked of both teacher and

former student participants. 18 out of the 22 teachers completed the two open-ended responses, representing 82% of the teacher survey participants. 16 out of the 16 former student participants completed the two open-ended responses, representing 100% of the former student survey participants.

A tally system was used to report the common themes for both the teacher and former student surveys. Responses within each theme were tallied and three top common themes that emerged. The top three themes that emerged from teacher survey responses to Question 9: What are your current thoughts on Aboriginal education supports offered to struggling Aboriginal students in NLPS? are presented in Table 4.5 and will be discussed further in Chapter 5.

Table 4.5

Top Three Themes on Aboriginal Education Supports for Engaging Struggling Aboriginal Students in NLPS from Teacher Surveys with Example Quotes (Question 9)

Theme	# of Respondents (n=18)	% of Respondents
Successful Supports	3*	17%
Demonstrating Improvements	6**	33%
Needs Improvement	9***	50%

* “Programs like ABOUT in NLPS are definitely an asset.”

** “I think that they are improving slowly but we still have work to do.”

*** “Terrible, and in many ways getting worse as funds and programs vanish.”

Table 4.6 provides the data from the teacher responses to Question 10 of the survey: Do you have a success story of a former or present Aboriginal student that was a result of a positive student-teacher relationship? If so, please share.

Table 4.6

Positive Student-Teacher Relationships that Led to Student Success from Teacher Surveys with Example Quotes (Question 10)

Theme	# of Respondents (n=18)	% of Respondents
Shared a Success Story	12*	67%
Did Not Have a Success Story	6**	33%

* “I set up his entire education plan around Aboriginal backgrounds and understandings. I developed a strong relationship with him and he has become a strong advocate for Aboriginal rights.”

** “Not yet 😊”

Observations from Tables 4.5 were that there were 50% of the teacher participants that believed that the current supports offered to struggling Aboriginal students require improvement. Table 4.6 showed that 67% of the teacher participants were able to provide specific success stories that were a result of a positive student-teacher relationship.

ABOUT graduate participants were given space to answer the following two questions:

14. What are your current thoughts on Aboriginal supports offered to struggling Aboriginal students in NLPS?

15. Please share any ways that the Circle of Courage concept helped to engage you as a student.

The top three themes of Question 14 in the student surveys are presented in Table 4.7 and will be discussed further in Chapter 5:

Table 4.7

Top Three Themes on Aboriginal Education Supports for Engaging Struggling Aboriginal Students in NLPS from Student Surveys with Example Quotes (Question 14)

Theme	# of Respondents (n=16)	% of Respondents
Successful Supports	2*	12%
Needs Improvements	7**	44%
ABOUT led to Student Success	7***	44%

* “I think that the offered support is a lot of help.”

** “There are too many Aboriginal students that fail to graduate. It seems like most schools don’t understand how to help these students.”

*** “I never felt engaged until I enrolled in the ABOUT Program. Many of my teachers in mainstream thought that I was just a lazy Indian because of my older brother, but in ABOUT I felt a sense of belonging.”

Table 4.8 provides the data from the student responses to Question 15 of the survey:

Table 4.8

*Ways that the Circle of Courage Engaged from Student Surveys with Example Quotes
(Question 15)*

Theme	# of Respondents (n=16)	% of Respondents
Belonging	9*	57%
Mastery	4**	25%
Generosity	1***	6%
Independence	1****	6%
Circle of Courage Did Not Engage	1*****	6%

(*) “The Circle of Courage allowed me to feel like I belonged. My teacher made our classroom feel like a community.”

(**) “I got to demonstrate my artwork and family stories (showing Mastery).”

(***) “The thing that I remember most of the Circle of Courage was always being encouraged to show my generosity in the class. It helped a group of bad kids do nice things.”

(****) “My teacher came to the hospital when I had my baby. He made me feel like I was an amazing student and that I could be an independent mommy.”

(*****) “The Circle of Courage didn’t help me at all.”

Table 4.7 illustrated that 44% of student participants shared that the ABOUT Program provided them the opportunity to have success. Another 44% noted that the

supports offered to struggling Aboriginal students needed improvement. Table 4.8 showed that 94% of student participants shared that the Circle of Courage helped engage them as a learner. 57% of the participants identified that the ability to feel a sense of belonging is what engaged them most.

A discussion of these common themes, as well as others will be presented in Chapter 5. It will explore specific factors that relate to how positive student-teacher relationships, focused on the Circle of Courage, help engage our struggling Aboriginal learners.

Chapter 5: Summary, Discussion and Conclusions

Leaders must be willing to wear the scars that leadership, through education change, brings with it.

-Heifetz & Linsky

Summary

This study investigated and analyzed the factors of how positive student-teacher relationships, focused on the teachings of the Circle of Courage, can help engage our struggling Aboriginal learners. This research question was provoked by the low success rates and engagement rates of Aboriginal students in Nanaimo Ladysmith Public Schools (NLPS) and the entire province of B.C. in comparison to their non-Aboriginal counterparts. Some of the reasons for the lower results and lack of engagement is caused by the struggles that the Aboriginal people of Canada have and continue to face, such as colonization, residential schools, and racism by the dominant culture. This study aims to provide educators and school systems with evidence from teachers and from Aboriginal students who have both struggled and had success within their community of learners with the use of the Circle of Courage.

Although there are low success rates for Aboriginal students across NLPS and the province of BC, programs such as the ABOUT Program are helping to improve graduation rates for Aboriginal students. Since the creation of the ABOUT Program in NLPS, graduation rates have increased by more than 20%. This study was done to discover what was working for students and teachers, so schools and staff could be provided with meaningful data to help them to implement learning strategies that can improve engagement of Aboriginal students in their school and community.

This study examined the connection between the teachings of the Circle of Courage and the engagement of struggling Aboriginal students. The researcher examined

literature and relevant research in the introduction and literature review and designed a survey that allowed both former Aboriginal students and current teachers from NLPS to share their thoughts and experiences on engaging Aboriginal learners. The surveys offered both close-ended statements and two open-ended questions. The close-ended statements provided the researcher with quantitative data, while the open-ended responses were intended to allow participants to provide information that was not addressed in the close-ended statements. The data were recorded and displayed through tables that provided common themes that demonstrated effective strategies to help better engage struggling Aboriginal learners.

Discussion

The research findings demonstrated that positive student-teacher relationships were the most important part of engaging Aboriginal students. The close-ended statement on both the former student and teacher surveys: “Positive student teacher relationships are important for keeping Aboriginal students engaged” gave the highest mean scores of any statements on the survey (former students 4.7 and teachers 4.9). Relationships with each student and their family allow for relevant and meaningful learning and restorative practices that help engage students and allow them to feel a sense of belonging. “[Students] need to be surrounded in their homes and schools with adults who believe that they can learn” (Halbert & Kaser, 2013, p. 38). Former student and teacher responses suggest that struggling Aboriginal students require an atmosphere that will allow them to have success and build their self-esteem and confidence. Halbert and Kaser (2013) believe that a positive relationship between teacher and student is a crucial component for the student to begin to make “transformative shifts in their learning”

(p.37). They agree that this relationship promotes a mindset shift for students, where they develop a belief that their teacher believes they are capable of success, in turn building a student's self-esteem and confidence.

The data gathered through this study showed that both students and teachers believe that positive student-teacher relationships are important for engaging Aboriginal students, but further support to teaching staff is required to improve the engagement of struggling Aboriginal learners. Teachers expressed a strong need for more information for *how* to engage Aboriginal students in their classroom and school building. Through the teacher surveys the researcher noticed a high mean score of 4.3 on the statement: "I need more information on how to engage my Aboriginal students." When researching all teachers in NLPS, Tait (2010) identified "A lack of Aboriginal resources and a lack of knowledge of Aboriginal cultures proved to be challenges to integrating Aboriginal content, as perceived by teachers" (p. 33). It was clear through this study that traditional Aboriginal philosophies of education are not familiar to the teachers that participated in the study.

Strategies such as the Circle of Courage model emphasize approaches that have been refined for over 15, 000 years of civilization, and have been preserved through oral traditions (Brokenleg et al., 2002). This study illustrates that programs, such as ABOUT, provide instruction that focus on relevant and meaningful learning with a strong emphasis on culture, not only help students feel a strong sense of self, but allow for engagement that leads to successful academic results. This is supported with the data provided by the student surveys in Chapter 4. Tables 4.4 and 4.5 illustrate that the engagement of the student participants in a traditional mainstream high school had a mean score of 1.8 in

comparison to a mean score of 4.3 during their time as a learner in the ABOUT Program. The questions that were about specific elements of the Circle of Courage also provided evidence to back up recommending its use.

In June 2014, the ABOUT Program allowed more Aboriginal students to cross the graduation stage than any other school in NLPS. Each of these students did so with “dignity, purpose and options” (Halbert & Kaser, 2013, p. 9). This study shows that there was an extreme improvement in each student’s engagement. This improvement was linked to building a sense of belonging, mastery, independence and generosity when they attended with ABOUT in comparison to their experience shared in a mainstream high school. 94% of the former student participants shared that the Circle of Courage helped engage them as a student. 57% of the student participants shared an example of how belonging was the part of the Circle of Courage that was able to engage them in their learning. “Research shows that belonging to a community (Tiyospaye) continues to be the most significant factor in Sioux identity” (Brokenleg et al., 2002, p. 47).

Unfortunately, when examining the teacher responses to “I use the Circle of Courage model” the mean and mode scores were the lowest in the entire survey with the scores of 2.5 and 1. These results have shown that the Circle of Courage is effective for engaging Aboriginal learners, but it appears that more teachers need support in learning and implementing its philosophies in their classroom.

The Circle of Courage model is simple and as represented by the success in the ABOUT Program, can be quite effective. Teachers that participated echoed that they require more information on how to engage Aboriginal learners and the Circle of Courage should be looked upon as resource that can be an effective way of engaging all

of the learners in a school. In teachers' written response questions 50% of those who participated believed that NLPS Aboriginal Education supports offered to struggling, Aboriginal students need improvement

Limitations

This study's purpose was to determine any connection between positive student-teacher relationships focused around the Circle of Courage and engagement of Aboriginal students. Each of the student participants had, at one time in their educational journey, dropped out or been withdrawn from school because of their lack of engagement in school. Through the data that students provided, there was clear evidence that showed that positive student-teacher relationships and the concept of the Circle of Courage were beneficial in engaging students that participated in the study. Despite a strong return rate from both former students and teachers this study examined only the teachers from two of the six secondary schools in NLPS and one group of Aboriginal graduates. Thus, it should be taken into consideration that students and teachers from other schools may have provided different results than the sample in this study. I also recognized that those that did not respond to the surveys may have different experiences and beliefs on how effective the teachings of the Circle of Courage are in engaging struggling Aboriginal students.

Another limitation to the study was that no demographics were taken from the student population to help maintain anonymity. Upon review of the study, more information from the student and teacher participants could have provided a clearer picture of the background of the study's participants. This would help the reader better identify how well the study's results would apply to the groups that they are interested in.

Implications for Policy and Practice

Through the research that went into this study, one thing became very clear. The amount of empirical research on engaging struggling Aboriginal students is lacking in both NLPS, but also across the province of BC. The findings from this study have helped to identify that many Aboriginal learners require content that is meaningful to them based on their values. In order for educators to involve Aboriginal learners, the learner must have, first, the courage to succeed and feel a sense of belonging, and that can be facilitated through the teachings of the Circle of Courage. To develop courage in students, there must be a positive and healthy student-teacher relationship of trust. Educators need to develop a better understanding of the values behind Aboriginal learners and what they need in order to be engaged in their learning. And this can be done through further research into the area of engagement.

The classrooms, programs and schools that I have been able to be a part of provided ample opportunities for cultural integration, but I know the biggest reason many of the struggling Aboriginal students show up every single day, is because they value their relationship with their teacher, Education Assistant (EA), Child Youth Family Support Worker (CYFSW), counsellor or principal. I am passionate about the role strong trusting relationships play in learning. The data that I have received from the student and teacher participants in this study have offered me a deeper understanding of how positive student-teacher relationships, focused on the Circle of Courage, can help engage our struggling Aboriginal learners. The study has also indicated that teachers and students need to be more successful in becoming more engaged in their learning and teachings. My future hopes are that our teachings will offer students more than just a

high school diploma, but the confidence to reach beyond their own self-imposed limitations. They will find meaning in their learning, confidence in their future and become role models in their communities. My late grandfather always reminded me of the wise words of his family and community: “Tell me and I'll forget. Show me, and I may not remember. Involve me, and I'll understand.” We need to learn by getting involved *with* our Aboriginal learners so that we can, together, begin to improve learning environments that foster success for *all* students within our educational community.

Throughout the 20th century and beyond, public education went through some comprehensive change, but there is still a lack of clear harmony of what is required for all of our students to achieve success and what morals and ethics to follow (Muhammad, 2009). There will seldom be a perfect solution for all, but teachers must together, as a team, identify a mission that they can all find morally and ethically effective. The values of each of the themes embodied within the Circle of Courage can effectively be used in the mission statements of each school to help improve engagement and learning.

It became clear through the analysis of the data within this study that teachers need more support in understanding ways to better support the needs of Aboriginal learners. NLPS's Professional Learning Communities (PLC's) offer one way we can provide this opportunity for teachers. According to Buffan et al. (2008) a successful PLC can help align school culture and structure through six essential characteristics:

- 1.) Common mission, vision, values and goals
- 2.) Collaborative culture
- 3.) Collective inquiry
- 4.) Action orientation

5.) Continuous improvement

6.) Focus on results

And so, if we can all agree that there needs to be more support for teachers in this area, and also agree that struggling Aboriginal learners need more support, then the PLC structure within NLPS could be the venue for teachers to learn about the values within the Circle of Courage model. The Circle of Courage gives a clear visual that can allow teachers within PLC groups to gain knowledge of how to build cultures in the classroom that will nurture the needs of Aboriginal learners.

In all the research that speaks to successfully creating and sustaining change within an educational system, one consistent common trend is that change is created most effectively when the initiatives being moved forward are by a group of people as opposed to just one an individual. Inquiry can be done individually, but when carried out by a team of people it can often enrich the data that you receive and help promote successful change. When people come together to work toward a common goal they are likely of a curious nature and people who are willing to take risks to make a positive change. “Curious individuals are unafraid to dream new dreams ... and, as a result, their leadership makes a bigger and more positive impact” (Halbert & Kaser, 2013, p. 11).

Leading a group of curious leaders who are not afraid to take risks and make mistakes can create a very powerful environment within a school building. This is how the ABOUT Program was able to celebrate so much student and teacher success in its short existence. The Circle of Courage gives each student and teacher a clear recipe of what is required to become engaged in their learning. As a teacher, I became committed to learning this model and adapting my teaching strategies so that each student had the

opportunity to flourish in their educational setting. With the nature of these teachings and the commitment that teachers have shown in better supporting learners' needs, positive relationships developed. To be a successful change leader, we must foster the development of dynamic groups willing to take risks, and encourage teachers to continue to learn and seek new ways to engage struggling students. They must, too, role model the same qualities if they hope to continue to improve the engagement of our Aboriginal learners. As a leader in NLPS and among the Aboriginal communities, I will continue to provide more empirical research and strategies that will allow us to celebrate more engagement and learning among all our Aboriginal students. This is a movement that is close to my heart and it is my dream that another Aboriginal student does not feel the lack of belonging and engagement that I felt as a learner.

Suggestions for Further Research

This research has allowed me to gather data that I hope will help effectively lead a change in learning and engagement for both students and teachers. It has also left me with many questions about what I would like to study next. These questions were quickly answered when I was contacted by Dr. Hare and Dr. Archibald of University of British Columbia to invite me to contribute a chapter for their upcoming book. This contribution will allow me further my research on the topic of engaging our Aboriginal learners. This book will be titled "Celebrating K-12 Aboriginal Education in British Columbia: Curriculum, Pedagogy and Policy Successes." It is being published in collaboration with the BC Principals and Vice Principals Association (BCPVPA) and UBC Faculty of Education's Indigenous Education Institute of Canada, Associate Dean of Indigenous Education, and the Professorship of Indigenous Education in Teacher

Education. I am thrilled to continue my journey of learning and helping improve the learning opportunities for all Aboriginal students across the province of British Columbia.

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8. As a student in mainstream high school, I had the opportunity to participate in community service and show generosity in my classroom.

1 2 3 4 5

9. As a student in the ABOUT Program, I had the opportunity to participate in community service and show generosity in my classroom.

1 2 3 4 5

10. I was engaged during my time in mainstream high school.

1 2 3 4 5

11. I was engaged during my time in the ABOUT Program.

1 2 3 4 5

12. Teachers need more support and education to help engage Aboriginal students.

1 2 3 4 5

13. The Circle of Courage concept helped engage me in school.

1 2 3 4 5



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Appendix B: Teacher Survey

Please do not identify yourself, schools or any other individuals in the questions included in this survey.

Please circle one or more answers for the next two questions.

Years of Teaching Experience: 0-5 5-10 10-15 15+

Grade Level Taught: 8 9 10 11 12 Support
Teacher

Please circle the number that best represents your choice for questions 1-8.

1 Strongly Disagree 2 Disagree 3 Neutral 4 Agree 5 Strongly Agree

1. Positive student-teacher relationships are important for keeping Aboriginal students engaged.

1 2 3 4 5

2. Aboriginal students feel a sense of belonging in my classroom.

1 2 3 4 5

3. Aboriginal students feel competent in my classroom.

1 2 3 4 5

4. Aboriginal students are encouraged to express independence in my classroom.

1 2 3 4 5

5. Aboriginal students have the opportunity to participate in community and express generosity in my classroom.

1 2 3 4 5

6. All of my Aboriginal students are engaged in the classroom.

1 2 3 4 5

7. I need more information on *how* to engage my Aboriginal students.

1 2 3 4 5

8. I use the 'Circle of Courage' model.

1 2 3 4 5

Please do not identify yourself, any school names or any other individuals in the questions included in this survey.

9. What are your current thoughts on Aboriginal education supports offered to struggling Aboriginal students in NLPS?

10. Do you have a success story of a former or present Aboriginal student that was a result of a positive student-teacher relationship? If so, please share.



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Appendix C: Student Research Information Sheet

Engaging Through the Circle of Courage former ABOUT Student Survey

September, 2014

Dear Former ABOUT student and High School Graduate,

My name is Brett Hancock and I am the former teacher of the ABOUT Program in Nanaimo Ladysmith Public Schools (NLPS). I am also a student at Vancouver Island University (VIU). I am working on completing my Masters in Educational Leadership (MEDL). As part of my MEDL, I am looking into the engagement of Aboriginal learners. My question that I am trying to answer is: "How can positive student-teacher relationships, focused on the teachings of the Circle of Courage, help engage our struggling Aboriginal learners?" I am asking for the support of teachers from two secondary schools in NLPS and former Aboriginal graduates to help me with this work. You are being asked to participate in this study by completing a short survey because you are a NLPS former graduate who attended with the ABOUT Program. The survey will take approximately 15 minutes of your time and can be completed anytime during the next week. Thank you for considering to participate in this study.

Participation in this study is completely anonymous, so you don't need to give your name. Given the small sample size and study population for this study, it is unlikely that I can guarantee the anonymity of participants. The survey asks for some background information and then 13 closed-statements where you just have to circle one answer. There are 2 open-ended questions around positive student teacher relationships focused on the Circle of Courage where you can write in sentences or in point form. Surveys can be returned to NDSS office if you decide to participate.

There are no known harms that are associated with your participation in this research. Your participation is completely voluntary and you may choose to participate or not without explanation. You may choose not to complete the entire survey, but once you submit your survey to NDSS, your information cannot be removed from the research results as it will not be possible to distinguish your work from other participants'.

My supervisor and I will be the only people with access to the research data. Completed surveys and other data will be stored in a locked filing cabinet until September 2017 and after that they will be shredded. All electronic files stored on the computer will be password protected and deleted in September 2017. I am excited to hear from both teaching staff and former students and hope that this can help both students and staff better engage our struggling Aboriginal learners. All results from this research will be reported in a written thesis as a requirement of VIU.

If you have any questions or concerns with the research or survey, please feel free to contact me at bhancock@sd68.bc.ca. Any questions or concerns with regards to your treatment as a

participant in this research, please contact the VIU Research Ethics Officer at 250-753-3245 (ext. 2665) or by email at reb@viu.ca.

By completing and submitting the survey, you are consenting to participate in this research. Please detach this page and keep this letter for you records.

Brett Hancock

Masters of Education Student

Vancouver Island University

bhancock@sd68.bc.ca

Rachel Moll, PhD, Supervisor

Faculty of Education

Vancouver Island University

Rachel.Moll@viu.ca

The following definitions will help you to interpret the questions on the survey.

Research Question: How can positive student-teacher relationships, focused on the teachings of the Circle of Courage, help engage our struggling Aboriginal learners?

Definition of Terms:

Aboriginal: First Nations, Metis and Inuit people of Canada. However varying terms such as Native, Indian or Indigenous, were used by the authors whose work contributed to this research were included so that the integrity of their words would not be lost. These words should be considered synonyms for Aboriginal.

Student engagement: occurs when students make a psychological investment in learning. They try hard to learn, take pride in their education, and often incorporate their positive learning experiences to improve their daily life.

Teacher: someone holding a current teaching certificate in the province of British Columbia.

Relationship: a connection or bond between two people, which includes mutual respect and understanding of each other's values.

Struggling: learners who are not meeting expectations in schools.

The Circle of Courage: is a model that derived from tribal teachings; it was used to promote positive youth development based on the universal principle that to be emotionally healthy all youth need a sense of belonging, mastery independence and generosity. This philosophy emerged from the collaboration of Martin Brokenleg and Larry K. Brendtro.

Mainstream School: elementary or high school that was a part of the public school system that had a traditional European approach to education (NOT Learning Alternatives).



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Appendix D: Teacher Researcher Information Sheet

Engaging Through the Circle of Courage Colleague Survey

September, 2014

Dear Colleague,

My name is Brett Hancock and in addition to being a Connect ND Tier 1 and 2 Coordinator at Nanaimo District Secondary School in Nanaimo Ladysmith Public Schools (NLPS), I am a student at Vancouver Island University (VIU) in the Masters in Educational Leadership (MEDL). As part of my MEDL degree at VIU, I am conducting research into the engagement of our Aboriginal learners. My question that is driving this research is: "How can positive student-teacher relationships, focused on the teachings of the Circle of Courage, help engage our struggling Aboriginal learners?" I am asking for the support of teachers from two secondary schools in NLPS and former Aboriginal graduates to help me with this research. You are being asked to participate in this study by completing a short survey because you are currently teaching at either Nanaimo District Secondary School or John Barsby Secondary School. The survey will take approximately 15 minutes of your time and can be completed anytime during the next week. Thank you for considering to participate in this study.

Participation in this study is completely anonymous, but given the small sample size and study population for this study, it is unlikely that I can guarantee the anonymity of participants. The survey asks for some background information and then 8 closed-statements and 2 open-ended questions around positive student teacher relationships focused on the Circle of Courage. Surveys can be placed in the envelope provided and be returned to the drop box in the school's office once completed.

There are no known harms that are associated with your participation in this research. Your participation is completely voluntary and you may choose to participate or not without explanation. You may choose not to complete the entire survey, but once you submit your survey into the drop box, your information cannot be removed from the research results as it will not be possible to distinguish your work from other participants'.

My supervisor and I will be the only people with access to the research data. Completed surveys and other data will be stored in a locked filing cabinet until September 2017 and then will be shredded. All electronic files stored on the computer will be password protected and deleted in September 2017. I am excited to hear from both teaching staff

and former students and hope that this can help both students and staff better engage our struggling Aboriginal learners. All results from this research will be reported in a written thesis as a requirement of VIU.

If you have any questions or concerns with the research or survey, please feel free to contact me at bhancock@sd68.bc.ca. Any questions or concerns with regards to your treatment as a participant in this research, please contact the VIU Research Ethics Officer at 250-753-3245 (ext. 2665) or by email at reb@viu.ca.

By completing and submitting the survey, you are consenting to participate in this research. Please detach this page and keep this letter for your records.

Brett Hancock

Rachel Moll, PhD, Supervisor

Masters of Education Student

Faculty of Education

Vancouver Island University

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Rachel.Moll@viu.ca

The following definitions will help you to interpret the questions on the survey.

Research Question: How can positive student-teacher relationships, focused on the teachings of the Circle of Courage, help engage our struggling Aboriginal learners?

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