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# EDUCATION *as* HEALING: HOW URBAN ABORIGINAL MEN DESCRIBED POST-SECONDARY SCHOOLING *as* DECOLONISING

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### ■ Abstract

This paper relates findings from learning circles held in Toronto, Ontario, Canada, with urban Aboriginal men. The purpose of the circles was to determine how an Aboriginal cultural identity is formed in urban spaces. Education settings were mentioned by the research participants as a significant contribution to their cultural identity development. Participants described elementary and secondary school experiences as lacking in Aboriginal inclusion at best or as racist. In contrast to these earlier experiences, participants described their post-secondary education as enabling them to work on healing or decolonising themselves. Specific strategies for universities to contribute to individual decolonising journeys are mentioned. A university that contributes to decolonising and healing must provide space for Aboriginal students where they feel culturally safe. The students must have access to cultural knowledge and its keepers, such as elders. Their teachers must offer Indigenous course content and demonstrate respect and love for their students. Courses must be seen to be relevant to Indigenous people in their decolonising process and use teaching styles that include humour and engender a spirit of community in the classroom. In particular, Indigenous language courses are important to Aboriginal students.

### ■ Introduction

David tells two stories about education. The first takes place in the mid-1990s on a sunny day when students in the ninth grade are thinking little about books. Mere months after being expected to put together a display of Aboriginal artefacts because he's the school's only Indian, David is assigned a special task in Physical Education class. The teacher, preparing the course for track and field, hands David a shovel and tells him to dig out the long jump pit. Standing above David, the teacher spits on the dirt, and says, "The way I see it is I'm the chief. And you're the Indian". After being strongly discouraged from pursuing legal action by the administration, David's marks plunged and he enrolled in a new school the following year. Flash forward five years to his second story. David has entered Canada's most populous university in its largest city, Toronto. He's enrolled in intermediate Ojibwe language class to learn Anishinaabemowin, the language of his grandparents (his parents, both Ojibwe, lost the language in residential schools and foster homes). He participates regularly in the Native Students Association, an organisation that has enabled him and other students to visit sacred sites like the "Teaching Rocks" several hundred kilometers away, participate in a purification lodge, and contribute to the development of a sacred space on campus – a garden laid out as a medicine wheel with Indigenous edible plants. One of David's (David is a pseudonym as are all other names referring to circle participants in this paper) stories portrays elementary and secondary schooling as a place where racism toward Aboriginal students is commonplace. The other suggests tertiary education provides empowerment and decolonising possibilities. This contradiction was at the heart of how participants in a recent study on urban male Aboriginal identity described their education experiences (Restoule, 2004). Here I will focus on the aspects of post-secondary education that the study participants described as "healing" or contributing to "healing". I will also extrapolate from their stories, suggestions and critiques for making universities a place that meaningfully contributes to decolonising.

The education recommendations that emerged from my study were a by-product of a much different research goal. I sought to test the idea that respectful research design would elicit data on identity development that was different in kind from other approaches in the literature (notably, Berry, 1999). In discussing areas of influence on their cultural identity development, education – formal schooling in particular – was presented as the primary location of the participants' relationships with the non-Native community. A surprising paradox emerged from their stories. They talked of how hurtful and destructive education had been for them and then stated how much they wanted to continue their education. Further analysis revealed that these Aboriginal men viewed their current educational experiences as somewhat decolonising whereas their early experiences were marked by prejudice and racism. With the post-secondary education they received greater choice in course selection, along with Aboriginal support services, allowing the subjects to use education for "healing". The participants called for teachers who demonstrate caring for each student personally, greater inclusion of Aboriginal content and methods in the curriculum, a need for education to relate to and engender community, and a general concern that education contribute to cultural reclamation, community development and ecological sustainability.

By decolonising, I mean to suggest first of all that, comparatively speaking, the post-secondary institutions the participants attended enabled exploration of their culture, including language, which was not afforded to them in their elementary and secondary schooling. Secondly, decolonising is understood as a process, not an end goal. One may always decolonise further but the work of decolonising may never be complete. While decolonising efforts and strategies can and must take place at local, community and global levels, an important locus of activity is within. Individual Aboriginal people must undergo a decolonising process that precedes or concurs with action on the macro level. When these Aboriginal men spoke of their post-secondary education as "decolonising" it was situated within a comparison with the education that they had experienced prior to this stage. Also, it was in reference to goals they set out for themselves as part of an individual decolonising journey, such as learning, or relearning, their languages, exploring and becoming cognisant of their histories, and contributing to a healthy environment. The words of the circle participants suggest that the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples' recommendations for education in Canada remain relevant 10 years after the release of their landmark report (Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, 1996). As Battiste (2005, Context section, para. 9) and others have written of RCAP in their rationale for a post-colonial university space:

The Report maintains that since educational institutions have a pivotal responsibility in transforming relations between Aboriginal peoples and Canadian society, they should respect Aboriginal knowledges and heritages as core responsibilities rather than a special project undertaken after other obligations are met [see RCAP, 1996, p. 515].

It is hoped that this paper will aid educators and administrators in achieving these goals.

#### ■ The research method and the participants

Circles have a long history of use among Aboriginal groups of the plains areas of North America. Originally employed in decision-making processes, the circle has been adapted and adopted for use in many more cultural areas for justice, health, social work and education (Fitznor, 1998; Hart 1996, 2002). In urban centres, the circle process has been used by Indigenous people from multiple cultures. Various terms "talking" circles, "sharing" circles or "healing" circles, a central tenet is that the stories shared with the group in circle do not leave the circle. With healing circles, in particular, part of the process is one symbolically throws their story in the fire at the centre, easing them of the pain of living with a burdensome story. I formed "learning" circles in 2003 as a forum to discuss how urban Aboriginal men develop a cultural identity in a setting assumed to be anathema to Indigenous cultures. The choice of the word "learning" was consciously borrowed from Absolon and Winchester (1994) whose research for the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples was intended to be shared with others. With the knowledge that the stories would go beyond the circle and would be shared in a spirit of "learning", I recruited participants through urban Aboriginal service organisations in Toronto.

The participants were seven men who self-identified as Aboriginal youth. Most were in their twenties except one participant in his forties who felt he was a "youth of his culture" since he was only beginning to pick up his culture's teachings. The participants identified variously as Oneida, Mohawk, Chippewa, Ojibwe, Anishinaabe, Quechua and "mixed". A requirement was that each participant had to have lived more than 75% of his life in an urban place. The focus on urban settlement was deliberately chosen to attempt to understand how Aboriginal people in a heterogenous cultural setting maintain an Aboriginal identity. Because more than half of all Aboriginal people in Canada live in urban areas, a study of Aboriginal identity ought to represent where a majority of the people claiming this identity reside. A host of literature presumes that the urban and Aboriginal life are anathema; that the Aboriginal person must assimilate, or give up their indigeneity in order to succeed, or that failure to adjust is what

causes urban Aboriginal poverty and other social ills. What are not represented in this literature are the Aboriginal people I've encountered who are quite able to balance living in urban spaces with a sense of pride and self-esteem in their Aboriginal identity. Neither did it represent the Aboriginal people who are able to reconnect or foster a sense of Aboriginal identity while growing up urban. How are they able to do this when Aboriginal populations in urban areas are disperse and diverse? These were the primary goals of the research and the education findings were but one aspect of the circle discussions on Aboriginal identity in the city.

The urban settings the participants called home included Windsor, London, Toronto and Hamilton, Ontario, all cities with populations greater than 100,000. One of the participants had lived in Boston, Massachusetts, for many years and another had lived in San Salvador for a time before moving to Canada. All of the participants had at least some post-secondary education experience with many of them currently studying at a college or university. The data came from two circles, one held in April of 2003 with four men and a second in October with three men. The small circle size enabled a great level of depth to be achieved in collecting the data. Every day, making and remaking Aboriginal identities in education institutions involves a tension between acceptance of and resistance to pressures to assimilate to Eurocentric ways. The men in this study shared their stories of the numerous ways they experienced and responded to these challenges. Although their stories are their own and are therefore unique to them, they remain stories that are likely to resonate with other Aboriginal people who have also experienced similar assimilative pressures and resistance strategies.

The data was sorted thematically. There emerged four significant areas of influence in the participants' cultural identity development: internalisation and resistance of stereotypes on an individual level; influence of immediate and extended family; influence of greater Aboriginal community; and influence of non-Aboriginal society. This final area was overwhelmingly dominated by education experiences which are sensible given that school is where the participants encountered non-Aboriginal people most often. It may be asking too much to expect this small number of men to somehow represent the experiences of all Aboriginal people but their stories may give us a point from which to begin our understanding and motivation to change the education system. Let us look at how this group experienced education at the tertiary level and what we can learn from them.

#### ■ Empowering education experiences

In direct contrast with their early education experiences, the participants described their post-secondary education experiences as empowering. They

often spoke of using their education as healing. This is in line with Castellano's (2000, p. 268) definition: "Healing is a term often used by Aboriginal people to signify the restoration of physical, social, emotional and spiritual vitality in individuals and social systems. It echoes in many ways, the concept of continuous growth and learning implied in holistic education". I understand "education as healing" in the context of the learning circles to be education that is concerned with cultural reclamation in the individual as well as learning that contributes to strong Indigenous communities and ecological sustainability. Indeed, in the circles, participants stressed the need for their education to have a healing component in this manner.

When the participants spoke of their post-secondary school experiences as contributing to healing, it was intended to be juxtaposed to the colonising effects of earlier education. We have already heard an example of racism from David's schooling. One circle participant spoke of being lashed with a ruler at his school if he pronounced words incorrectly while a participant from a different circle described being called "savage" by his first grade teacher. In a recent study of Aboriginal students in Saskatchewan, Schissel and Wotherspoon (2003, pp. 82-83) found that "racism is a problem for Aboriginal students, especially among those in high school. More than 35% of the high school students rate this as the greatest barrier to learning". Romeo described ways in which teachers taught the students that Indians were primitive and inferior, leading to a double consciousness where Romeo came to view "Indians" as inferior, denying his own identity, even as others clearly could see he was not "European". As Henderson (2000, p. 59) noted of Aboriginal experiences in Canadian schools, "Canadian educators daily ask that Aboriginal peoples acquiesce to or fit within the Canadian version of Eurocentrism ... we are being forced to affirm alien values and to sacrifice Aboriginal world views and values for norms outside traditional cultural aims". It was this requirement to relinquish an Indigenous identity, or to feel shame because of it, that caused most of the participants to speak ill of their earlier time in school. Other participants who could not recall particular incidents of racism described their early schooling as being woefully deficient of any Aboriginal content, a situation that supports the stereotypical idea of a vanishing race.

When describing their post-secondary education experiences, the participants provided a different picture. Indigenous presence within the university was consistently mentioned by the participants as critical to their success and was seen to be significant in at least three areas. One of these was the importance of a space dedicated to Aboriginal student support services. A space on campus where Indigenous students felt welcome and could meet and talk to other Aboriginal students and Aboriginal staff was often mentioned as being key to their academic success. A second area was

courses presented from an Indigenous perspective by Aboriginal faculty. In particular, the availability of Indigenous language courses was seen as a significant step forward in acknowledging and validating the cultures and knowledges of original peoples. A third area is the teaching approaches and relationships that Aboriginal faculty and staff tend to abide by: of engendering community feelings in classes and demonstrating care for their students. It is important to note that these experiences may not be available to all Aboriginal students attending university and that it was not always clear from the participants when they were referring to their experiences at University of Toronto or their experiences at other institutions they had attended. Indeed, not all Aboriginal students attending the University of Toronto would necessarily find it so inviting or empowering. However the basic characteristics which they identified as contributing to their success, as well as those which contributed to their personal development, are important to heed in our efforts to make education available and welcoming to Aboriginal students.

### ■ Space

It was extremely important to the participants' sense of belonging in higher education that there were Indigenous spaces at the University of Toronto. This is not only metaphorical space, as in the offering of courses related to Indigenous subjects and issues, but real, actual, material space where Indigenous people could congregate. An example often discussed was University of Toronto's First Nations House, the name given to the space on the main campus housing the Office of Aboriginal Student Services and Programs. Established in 1992 as a subsidiary of University of Toronto Student Services, the Office of Aboriginal Student Services and Programs includes a financial officer, cultural programmer and recruiter among its Aboriginal staff. An Aboriginal resource centre with full time librarian as well as two elders-in-residence are available to all university students. There is also a kitchen which, in addition to being a place where students can prepare cultural foods, as well as save money on making their own meals, often becomes a locus of meet-and-greet activity. Finally, there is the lounge space intended for students who need a place to rest between classes but doubles as a space hosting visiting speakers, elders, special events and many of the smaller Aboriginal studies classes.

First Nations House was mentioned specifically by the participants as significant to their identity development and their ability to learn and achieve well in school. Part of this site's importance is the cultural safety it represents (see Bin-Sallik, 2003). Aboriginal people are free to be themselves, meet other Aboriginal people and not have to explain themselves. Tied to this characteristic is the access to cultural knowledge of

peers and mentors. For example, George spoke highly of the Aboriginal staff at First Nations House, comparing some of the staff to elders and traditional teachers and stated "I learn from everybody [on the staff]". It is clear that without a space dedicated to Aboriginal needs, access to Aboriginal staff and resources would be minimal. Without this connection, Aboriginal youth, like George, might feel alienated, unsupported, and unmotivated to finish their programs.

Access to cultural knowledge is an important part of what First Nations House offers too. Students can visit elders at the school and talk to them about spiritual or emotional needs. In many Aboriginal traditions, the developing person is conceptualised as having four capacities of self, all of which must be addressed and work in balance with one another. The capacities are often termed as the spiritual, physical, emotional and mental (Armstrong, 1996). If one is over-stressed, one must balance by focusing on another aspect of one's being. In the university setting, it is often the mental/intellectual capacity that is the focus with students expected to fill the other needs on their own time. Thus, an education that goes beyond intellect to nurture, recognise and respect the spiritual underpinnings to Indigenous knowing is crucial to the meaningful inclusion and development of Aboriginal students. It begins first of all by inclusion of the people and their knowledge in course content.

### ■ Indigenous course content

Indigenous people are an important part of Canadian society, historically as well as in the contemporary moment and its future. Yet, Indigenous contributions and content are often excluded from many core courses in the university or treated tangentially as a "special" topic or somehow "alternate" viewpoint. Certainly, in the memories of the participants, this reality is an improvement over their elementary and secondary school experiences where Indigenous people were non-existent, or if included, demonised. Randolph said, "I never dreamt of being on the university grounds in my life because I was always told as a younger child that I was stupid". In contrast to these experiences, the fact that an Aboriginal studies program exists was seen to be highly noteworthy. As Matthew said, "Taking Aboriginal studies really helped me reflect on what my values were". Like First Nations House, having an Aboriginal studies program contributes to a sense of cultural safety. It is an area where students can feel safe because their histories, cultures, philosophies and spiritualities are presented respectfully. Indigenous knowledge, rather than being dismissed as folk tales and superstition, is presented as having value, validating identities in the process. Randolph, in a different circle confirmed this viewpoint: "We couldn't do this before ... it wasn't accepted by the non-Aboriginal side". One can not stress enough how important it is to

provide these perspectives. It strikes to the core of one's being.

Randolph spoke passionately about how learning about Aboriginal history and achievements finally made him proud to be an Indian: "And every time I learn a little more I'm so fascinated and I get so proud of my people that it's just unbelievable how they went about doing that ... It wasn't a low life. It was a very highly advanced lifestyle that our Aboriginal people lived". The pride Randolph feels when learning about his own culture is a significant factor in retaining Aboriginal students as supported by Schissel and Wotherspoon (2003) in their study of Aboriginal students in Saskatchewan schools. The results illustrate that cultural education is indeed associated with the likelihood that students will stay in school. Just under 40% of students with cultural education have dropped out of school at least once, compared to 50% of those with no cultural training and 78% of those with little. It is difficult to establish definitely the causal connection between the two variables, but it is defensible that cultural training has a positive influence on students staying in school (Schissel & Wotherspoon, 2003, p. 95).

This inclusion of Aboriginal histories, practices, perspectives and ways provides pride and self-esteem, an important and necessary first step to personal healing. In the October circle, the inroads that Aboriginal learning has made in universities was likened to a healing process: "It's that part of education that heals. It's a healing because when you use the word education in that non-Native society it's just to do with learning. But when we deal with education in the Aboriginal society it's actually to do with the healing of our people and our old ways". What Randolph said here explicitly is that Aboriginal students expect their education to have a healing component to be meaningful to them. More specifically, education must respect Indigenous values if it is to heal. Brown (2004, p. 36) has argued convincingly that "a strong value system is essential for learning; [that] student's values must be recognized and incorporated into the curricula to promote learning; [and] emotions must be allowed to be expressed and enthusiastically incorporated into the life of the school and the everyday activities in the classroom". Bringing emotions into the classroom as well as the spiritual values underpinning those emotions aids in the healing process because it addresses the whole person.

Healing in Aboriginal education and health is intimately tied in with concepts of holism and balance. Many Aboriginal people believe that the health of a community is closely connected with the health of the families within the community as well as the individuals within those families (Morrisseau, 1998). In an ever-widening set of circles, the individual is at the centre, surrounded by family, which is encompassed by the community which is enveloped by the environment and Creation. Before the individual can work on

healing his family, community or Creation, he must first find balance within himself. Developing pride and self-esteem in Aboriginal students is necessary to their own success but is also the foundation of building capacity for Aboriginal community development and meaningful education.

An important part of the Aboriginal person's individual movement toward healing is an emotional investment on the part of the student in the education process. Two particular examples from the circles come to mind. The first is Matthew's story. He said, "I've come to the point where I've decided that ecology is important. We shouldn't be building things that are just wasting resources, or wasting energy. So what I want to do, my aspirations are, through my schooling I want to be able to build off-grid housing. I want to build self-sustainable structures". He went on to describe his vision of Aboriginal communities generating their own power and sharing the excess power with each other and selling it to non-Aboriginal people living nearby. Matthew saw this as an important step to community self-determination as well as decreasing dependence on non-renewable energy sources to contribute to the earth's healing. Worth noting is how he viewed the need for Canadian education to enable him to do this healing and decolonising work. With the skills gained from Canadian institutions, Matthew would contribute to decreasing his and other Aboriginal community's dependencies on the state. The other story is that of Randolph who moved away from his training in electronics. When he learned that the work he was doing was contributing to United States Marine Corps missiles, Randolph said, "I definitely wasn't interested because I couldn't see myself building something of destruction". Our circles clearly viewed education as political, raced, and needing to be applied positively to have utility. If the students could not see the education experience as potentially healing to themselves or their communities, or even the larger global community, they could not get emotionally involved.

#### ■ Delivery of course content and teaching styles

Similarly, the students required an emotional investment from their teachers to feel a sense of belonging in the school. The very availability of courses, programs and support, while important, is not enough in itself. The style of teaching and the relationship developed with the teacher were mentioned by participants as essential. For example, the engendering of community feeling and collective spirit in the classes, a teaching style often found in Aboriginal studies, was important to their success. Introducing humour into the class and making learning fun were presented as important to healing and cultural reclamation, particularly learning Indigenous languages. The participants spoke at length about the significance of learning an Indigenous language. At any level of education, participants

mentioned their need to have teachers who know them personally and who indicated they cared about the direction their students were headed.

It is again instructive to compare what participants said about university teachers in comparison to their earlier experiences with pedagogues. George mentioned that too many of his teachers in his high school days could not be bothered to get to know him: "I truly believe there's only probably under 5% of teachers should be teaching. The rest shouldn't be teachers. From my experience. They just really shouldn't. And if you're not going anywhere, you know, they're not really trying to help you either". When asked whether he had any teachers who made a difference, he mentioned one who bothered to push him saying he had talent and should pursue it:

That's what I think makes a good teacher. Someone who helps you, you know what I mean? Or wants to help you. And really sees what you're about. And takes the time to keep you after class and say, "Hey, is something wrong? What's happening? How can I help you? I see that you have talent. Use it. Don't waste your time".

The circles mentioned that they felt they had in their post-secondary experiences staff and teachers who cared about them personally and this made a difference in what they were able to achieve. Schissel and Wotherspoon's (2003, p. 86) respondents echoed this finding: "50 percent of students indicated that they like the relaxed atmosphere of alternative schools. They described the context as "nicer teachers, more caring atmosphere, better race relations, and cultural learning". When asked about teachers, 45% of students said that the teachers were easy to talk to. Thirty percent said certain teachers were easy to talk to. The students in their study also said they were treated with respect in alternative schools in comparison with their experiences in regular school programs. From the words of the participants, Aboriginal students require teachers who take an interest in their students on a personal level and demonstrate caring.

The students in Schissel and Wotherspoon's, as well as my study, confirm a need for the inclusion of Indigenous values in their education. Respect was explicitly mentioned, as was caring. As Hodgson-Smith (2000) notes, educators often substitute the word caring for love because it seems somehow more acceptable. If we are to understand the way in which these students talk about caring as equivalent to the teaching of love in Anishinaabe traditions, then we see at least two of the seven sacred teachings are explicitly mentioned as important to students (see Benton-Banai, 1988, for an explanation of the seven grandfather teachings. In addition to respect and love, the other five are wisdom, humility, bravery, honesty and truth). It has been said that education would be

indigenised if teachers were to establish close personal relationships with their students (Johnny, 2002; Sawyer, 1983). That love or caring is highlighted in the literature on Aboriginal education only confirms its significance. Hrechka (2000, p. 74) noted in work with at-risk Aboriginal students: "It is necessary to look at all students as individuals with individual needs and circumstances. The school needs to be a place where they accept, accommodate and respond to students in a manner that enables their maximum social, emotional and intellectual growth". This description is a call for respect. Respect is achieved by teachers' orientation to their students, but schools need to demonstrate respect by including Indigenous content in their programming.

Indeed, course availability was an important part of the participants' education choices. At least one participant said that he took a language course because it was offered. He reflected on how he observed his elders taking the courses and having fun doing it. For him, it was a powerful symbol to see people taking and succeeding at the language courses that were once so strongly disciplined for and discouraged from speaking their Indigenous languages. He thought it showed that our generation really has no excuse to not take advantage of these courses for we would not be subject to the same levels of racism. Yet, he mentioned also that it took him a few years to get the courage to enrol. He only did after seeing several others take the courses and seeing how they felt about it. There is a strong message in this example for people who fund language programs and work on implementation: the programs need time to build momentum. As gains are made by the early program users, word will spread and greater numbers will become attracted to the programs. Programs need to have resources, like time, effort and money, invested in them with a long-term basis to see the benefits. This is especially important when one considers how intimidating it can be to enrol in a language course.

Aboriginal language educators have noted how fearful and intimidating it can be for Indigenous people to attempt to learn their languages (Crawford, 1996; Flores et al., 2002). There are additional pressures for Aboriginal people learning Aboriginal languages such as the burden of responsibility for ensuring language survival. That is, believing that the language will die if they do not learn it and pass it to the next generation, is a great weight on the learner's being. Hence, making learning fun by using humour was viewed as an important strategy as Randolph testifies: "And I think that's a good big step in our Aboriginal education is to have fun in there when you're doing it. Because if there's no fun, they they're not going to want it. They're going to turn away". Randolph was speaking of fun in contrast to the fear that existed around language learning in his youth. Making it fun to learn a language he was once beaten for speaking

was very important to providing the encouragement and positive reinforcement necessary to learn it again. These strategies are all the more significant for language's role in contributing to healing processes.

Language learning is important to individual healing and personal decolonisation. One participant spoke of having greater confidence in himself and of having a closer connection to the people in his home community after taking language courses at university:

I feel more comfortable now when I go back to Oneida, like you said [indicating James] you pick up a few words like food and all that, and fish, you go "gee" and bread and all that, and I knew that right off the bat because that was part of, you know, survival. I had to know that. So. But there's other parts in there that I've learned now that are just as important as food, and you know, things that I have to say even before I eat and you know, I thank the Creator for that food. You know, I have to be able to address the people when I come into the room even before I eat that food. So before I was just like, Boom! I was at the table. I was eating. Now, I can come in, I can say hello to everybody. Sit down and talk a little bit about something else before we even eat. It's not just run in and eat. So, it's kind of fun.

Languages were considered important by the participants because they are the repositories of knowledge, traditions and the cultures. As Spielmann (1998, p. 49) reports, "Some elders go so far as to say that, if an individual does not speak his/her Aboriginal language, that person is a not fully Anishinaabe and lacks a deeply-rooted sense of identity". Similarly, the circle participants all felt that language was an important part of knowing, understanding and living the culture. Most of the participants were taking language courses. Of course, for true language stabilisation, the languages need to be spoken in the home, but it is quite significant to see that this generation has opportunities to explore the languages that were not available to its parents.

Some of the participants are from Indigenous cultures whose homelands are far from Toronto, yet it was very important to them to take what Indigenous languages were available to them in Toronto. Romeo chose Anishinaabemowin because it's what is offered. He even spoke of his choice to take the Ojibwe language as "I'm actually learning Ojibwe ... So. That's a good sign. Changes are happening. And we're basically taking back what it was, actually ours". The experiences of assimilation and colonisation have meant that the craving for Aboriginal cultural knowledge among Aboriginal youth who have been raised without it sometimes leads to learning about whatever Aboriginal culture they can. There are clear decolonising motivations to learning an Indigenous

language, especially if it is your own. Since thought and expression of culture are primarily in the language, it is believed you can not really know an Aboriginal culture without knowing the language. In Collins' (1975) study of Ute ethnicity, Gertrude Willie quoted her father as saying it's more important to show that you can speak the language than to prove who it is you're related to or descended from. It is for reasons like this that the circle participants named language learning as particularly important in their education as healing journey. Not only was the language itself important to decolonising, the process of learning that helped connect participants to other members of their language speaking or language learning communities was significant too.

Clearly, language programs contribute to individual healing and decolonisation, but they can aid the community as well. Aboriginal community was disrupted by language loss. As the younger generations attempt to pick up their languages again, they find themselves building community with each other and with the elders who are healing to teach and transmit the language. Whether or not the languages are expected to survive, learning the languages aids in establishing tighter community ties and contributes to the self-esteem of Aboriginal people. The communities can not be healed unless individuals work at healing themselves. Language learning helps the healing process and aids in providing a feeling of belonging in community. The community feeling, central to Aboriginal student motivation is an important part of Aboriginal studies programs. Aboriginal studies courses at University of Toronto are mostly small sizes, under 25 students, which enables the instructors to get to know all their students by name. Sometimes the classes are capped to ensure that such a personal connection can be made. Indeed, many students of Aboriginal studies have commented that what they like about the program is the feeling of community that is experienced in the classroom. However safe Aboriginal studies programs are, they continue to be seen as places where Indigenous content can be relegated without taking on the challenge of changing the entire curriculum. As Battiste (2005, Context section, para. 12) notes:

Canadian universities, their faculties, and disciplines have responded inadequately, failing to correct historical prejudices and relegating Aboriginal knowledge and heritage to the margins of university life, particularly to Departments of Native Studies. Little effort has been made to develop new interdisciplinary methodologies to integrate European and Aboriginal knowledge on a basis of respect and equality.

While at the University of Toronto there have been some attempts to extend Aboriginal content, issues and



foci into core programs and courses, much more needs to be done. Encouragingly, in fall 2004 and spring 2005 at the University of Toronto, two days devoted to professional development and understanding of the importance and value of integrating Indigenous worldviews into all disciplines were well-attended voluntarily by faculty and staff members from a diverse group of subject areas. Many requested more information, more workshops, and demonstrated a commitment to the idea. Decolonising and healing is a process, one that continues and never ends, a relationship that is visited, maintained, and polished, and these steps are part of the process that we must engage in at this particular moment.

#### ■ What have we learned and what needs to be done?

It is worth noting that the participants, for the most part, attended schools in urban Canada controlled by provincial governments. In a context where Aboriginal people have very little control or input, it is not surprising that elementary and secondary schools were alienating experiences. Yet, the post-secondary institutions these participants spoke about, also not controlled by Aboriginal people and with minimal Indigenous input outside of Aboriginal studies, were described as aiding in the healing process for the circle participants. One could attribute this phenomenon to the self-directed nature of university learning; when the participants had choices in their subjects, they could put together a program for decolonising or healing. But as the participants themselves acknowledge, the ability to make those choices requires the options to be there in the first place. Randolph said he was learning his language now because “we didn’t even have [these courses] before”.

The courses, programs and faculty were there for Randolph because Aboriginal people who went through university before him advocated for courses, made arguments for funding and worked to achieve these goals without space, money or staff and enlisted non-Aboriginal allies to support these measures. As we build capacity by graduating more Aboriginal students, there will be more Aboriginal faculty offering more courses and sending academically qualified Aboriginal people to institutions and communities to restore our communities to their former strength. Perhaps one of these changes will be schools controlled and staffed by Aboriginal people. To get there, we can learn from the circle participants who, 10 years after the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples sought testimony from Indigenous people across Canada, continue to make the same arguments and recommendations. Because it remains the most comprehensive study of Aboriginal-Canadian relations it is worth revisiting RCAP’s education recommendations. RCAP made

at least 44 recommendations directly related to education, six of which regarded exclusively university-level change (see [www.ainc-inac.gc.ca/ch/rcap/index\\_e.html](http://www.ainc-inac.gc.ca/ch/rcap/index_e.html)). Several recommendations were made for mainstream institutions like the ones where the circle participants were studying. Among the comprehensive recommendations for the university was creating a welcoming environment for Aboriginal students; ensuring Aboriginal content and perspectives in course offerings across disciplines; developing Aboriginal studies and cross-cultural sensitivity training for faculty and staff; and treating Aboriginal languages as equivalent to European languages (RCAP, 1996, pp. 512-517). In all these undertakings, the Report emphasises the value of elders’ knowledge, and traditional Aboriginal arts (RCAP, 1996, pp. 525-529). Some of these changes require the will of political institutions that are not in Aboriginal control. We can continue to advocate and seek allies within these places of power to seek changes and to occasionally push the right motivating buttons, which at times will be reason, though sometimes its guilt. Others of these require simply the will of individuals in the right places. The most obvious example of change required is for individual teachers to adopt a style that includes all their students in a spirit of community, to tell their students they care, and follow through with acts demonstrating this care.

It is often assumed that attainment of higher levels of education means greater levels of assimilation into non-Aboriginal society. What this study of identity development found is that Aboriginal people do not necessarily become assimilated with higher levels of education. Indeed, at the post-secondary level, the students turned their degree programs into projects of decolonisation. They intend to use their learning in service of Aboriginal communities, both urban and rural, and often take language courses in order to attain closer understandings of Aboriginal worldviews. Indigenising pockets of the university has had an important and profound influence which can expand as we follow the RCAP recommendations which clearly remain relevant today. Listening to the circle participants’ stories tells us this, but also suggests that we need to supplement our indigenising of the academy with an indigenising of earlier stages of education too. We can not keep waiting for our youth to reach post-secondary levels before they feel their identities are valued, respected and reinforced. It may motivate us to work for these changes if we conceive of the day when David tells a third education story. In this telling David’s children learn Anishinaabe concepts in Anishinaabemowin, completing the circle of a decolonising Indigenous education.

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