

# Becoming a Teacher: Experiences of First Nations Student Teachers in Isolated Communities

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*The purpose of this research was to examine the experiences of First Nations student teachers living in isolated communities who were enrolled in a Native Teacher Education Program (NTEP). Tinto's (1975) model of dropping out/persistence provided the theoretical framework for the study. Mixed qualitative methods were used to collect data. It was found that most of the graduating students had considered withdrawing from the program. Reasons for remaining in the NTEP supported Tinto's model: students possessed specific personal qualities, they felt comfortable in the academic milieu, and they were socially connected with peers and had the support of family and friends.*

First Nations people believe that schools have a role to play in the survival process of their cultures and communities and that Native teacher education is a significant part of this (Bilash & Witse, 1997). Native teachers bring important benefits to the community and to the children they teach (Paulet, 1987). First, they understand the values of the community and infuse the Euro-Canadian curriculum with their language and culture. Second, they act as brokers between cultural maintenance and the economic advancement of individuals and of the entire community (Stairs, 1991). Education is seen as an important force in the preservation of Native culture and language, and it is also viewed as a means toward jobs and economic independence (Friesen & Orr, 1998). Third, the Native teachers instill self-esteem in the young people, which is regarded as a central mission for Native education (Government of Alberta, 1984; Orioux, 1988). Fourth, they serve as role models for their pupils and others in the community (Friesen & Orr; Government of Alberta). They demonstrate that hard work and persistence can lead to the achievement of their goals and the development of respect.

Noted in the literature are the barriers that keep Native people who live in isolated communities out of traditional teacher education programs (Bilash & Witse, 1997; Government of Alberta, 1984; Stairs, 1991). These include long periods of training time away from their families and the unfamiliarity of the non-Native culture (Friesen & Orr, 1998). Therefore, there has been a call for flexibility in the delivery of Native teacher education programs that includes community-based programs with a combination of summer school courses, supervised practica, and distance education courses (Bilash & Witse; Government of Alberta; Paulet, 1987; Stairs). Several advantages of this type of program delivery over the traditional are suggested: participation of local Elders, collaboration on adapting curriculum materials for Native classrooms, networking, and social support (Bilash & Witse). Friesen and Orr describe a four-year Aboriginal teacher education program in

northern Saskatchewan that does offer more flexibility than traditional Bachelor of Education programs. In this program the students take courses away from their reserves over several months and return for one to two weeks each month to work in classrooms in their own communities. The researchers found that the program has been successful in developing graduates who are role models for their community and who are proud of their culture and their ability to infuse it into the curriculum. As well, this teacher education program is seen as a means of building the capacity to achieve Native control over education.

*The Native Teacher Education Program at the University of Ottawa*

Since 1997 the University of Ottawa has offered a two-year community-based Native Teacher Education Program (NTEP) that includes courses delivered in person and through distance education, supervised practica, and work in the classrooms of their local schools. The program described in this research was provided in partnership with the Sioux Lookout District Program Management Committee. Under the criteria set forth in Ontario Regulation 184/97, the candidates must be of Native ancestry and hold the requirements for a Secondary School Graduation Diploma or standing the Ontario College of Teachers considers equivalent. The candidates must also have a knowledge of their Native language and have some experience working or volunteering in classrooms.

Over the two years students complete coursework and nine weeks of practice teaching. They also work in the classrooms of qualified teachers, called mentor teachers. These teachers model good professional behavior and support the student teachers' development. Courses are delivered through distance education (radio or telephone) and by face-to-face classes in the summers in the North. The coursework consists of the courses offered in the traditional 36-credit program and three other courses: teaching English as a second language, teaching Native languages, and computers. Each course is worth three credits and is 30 hours in length. It should be noted that the Faculty does its utmost to ensure similar content, means of assessment, and standards between the traditional program and the NTEP (e.g., similar learning materials, professors, assignments, etc.) The student teachers in this program have nine weeks of practice teaching divided into three three-week practica. The practice teaching sessions are supervised according to Faculty procedures by the Northern NTEP coordinator and the Faculty coordinator, both of whom are qualified teachers.

This NTEP is unique because the program elements are organized so as to provide support for the student teachers. The first element consists of the mentor teachers. Student teachers spend most of their two years working alongside their mentor teachers in the classrooms. The mentor teachers act as role models of professionalism, give feedback on the development of teaching skills, and provide moral support to the student teachers. The second element that supports the development of the student teachers is a course called the Reflective Seminar. It is given by the Northern coordinator on Friday afternoons and facilitates the understanding of classroom practice, pupil behaviors, and of the student teachers' own professional development. Regularly being together online fosters a sense of community and collegiality between the student teachers and the Northern coordinator. The third element is that wherever possible groups of students from

communities are admitted into the NTEP. Having a ready peer group to provide moral support and assistance with coursework may be of importance. The final component of the program that encourages a supportive environment is the presence of two coordinators (one in the North and one at the Faculty) who are available to answer questions and provide moral support and encouragement to the student teachers. Therefore, the above four components of the NTEP are designed specifically to develop a sense of connectedness and to provide support.

It should be noted that I am the Faculty coordinator of the NTEP offered by the University of Ottawa. Although I am non-Aboriginal, I have worked for many years in various capacities with First Nations people. I developed the NTEP described above in collaboration with the members of the Sioux Lookout Program Management Committee.

### *Theoretical Framework*

The theoretical framework used in this study was the model of dropping out or persistence posited by Tinto (1975). In this model the personal characteristics of the student are related to continuance in postsecondary institutions. This factor comprises four dimensions: family background, high school performance, high school program, and goal commitment. These internal characteristics are related to persistence among postsecondary students. External factors are also considered. The integration of the student into the academic and social systems of the institution are two further factors related to persistence. Tinto argues that the higher the degree of integration of the individual into the institution's systems, the greater will be his or her commitment to the specific institution and to the goal of completion. Therefore, Tinto's model of dropping out or persisting, which incorporates the three factors of personal characteristics, social integration, and academic integration, provides the theoretical basis for the study.

### *The Problem*

McKeown, MacDonell, and Bowman (1993) recommend that understanding the personal experiences of students comes from studying the matter from the perspective of the students themselves. At this point there are no studies that examine the experiences of First Nations student teachers enrolled in a community-based teacher education program using a framework of dropping out or persistence. So we need to understand what elements support the students' decisions to persist until they have completed the program.

The purpose of this research is to examine the experiences of First Nations student teachers living in isolated communities who are enrolled in a NTEP. The questions for the research are guided by Tinto's (1975) model of dropping out or persistence and are as follows.

1. Why do the student teachers in the NTEP want to become teachers?
2. Did these student teachers ever consider dropping out of the program?
3. What personal characteristics do they believe they possess that have assisted them in persisting to graduation?
4. Do program elements contribute to their successful completion of the NTEP?
5. What social support systems were used by the student teachers?

### *Method*

This study used mixed qualitative and quantitative methods that incorporated the three dimensions of Tinto's (1975) model of dropping out or persistence. The study was conducted in two phases, which were both carried out after the students had completed the requirements of the program. In the first phase, student teachers were asked to complete a questionnaire in which they responded to open-ended questions about their reasons for enrolling in the program, their personal characteristics, and the program elements and people that provided support. Participants also rated the importance of personal characteristics, program elements, and personal support networks using a five-point Likert scale. The second phase consisted of two focus groups held during the week before graduation when the students were in Ottawa. They followed the methods for conducting focus groups outlined by Morgan (1988). The purpose of the focus groups was to explore the reasons for being a teacher and for dropping out, as well how student teachers might be provided with increased support. The focus groups consisted of four and six people each and were audiotaped.

Using the data from the questionnaires and the transcripts of the focus groups, qualitative data were coded using symbols and categorized according to the questions that were asked (Miles & Huberman, 1984) and the frequency of responses. Themes emerged from these categories. Quantitative data were treated descriptively to produce means. The trustworthiness of the findings was established through triangulation and member checks (LeCompte & Preissle, 1993; Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

### *Findings*

#### *Reasons for Becoming a Teacher*

Most participants stated that they wanted to become a teacher to advance the situation of First Nations people (10/14). They felt that as teachers they could contribute to their communities by improving the quality of education and ensuring the survival of the culture. One woman stated, "As a teacher, I want to teach children about traditional values and increase their pride in being Native." Some also believed that schools should have Native teachers to act as positive role models in the community. As well, one person felt that through education Natives could control their own destinies.

Another reason cited for choosing to become a teacher was the enjoyment found in working with children (6/14). A participant commented, "I love working with young people, and feel that I have much to offer." Respondents also stated that they chose this career path because they enjoyed teaching children (6/14).

#### *Dropping Out*

Although the student teachers wanted to become teachers, most of them had contemplated withdrawing from the NTEP. Of the 11 people who did think about dropping out, five stated that the heavy workload was the main reason. This reason was particularly important during the first year of the program when the bulk of the courses were given. Many of the students were carrying family, work, and community responsibilities as well as doing four courses during the fall and winter sessions. Some students commented that balancing all these duties was

difficult. A woman said, "The work was fine. The problem was time." Another student wrote that she felt like dropping out when assignments were overdue, and she was concerned about her ability to do the work. Other reasons cited by the student teachers for feeling like withdrawing from the program were lack of confidence, fatigue, poor health, perceived lack of support from the coordinators, inability to find babysitters, and personal problems.

Three women stated that they had not considered withdrawing from the program. Of these students two did not have young children who required close supervision. However, one mother of a school-aged child stated that her sister babysat during practica and while she was taking courses. Hence these three students were never sufficiently discouraged by the lack of time to complete assignments or other reasons to contemplate dropping out.

This study also examined variables that may be related to persistence in the NTEP: personal characteristics, program elements, and personal support.

### *Personal Characteristics of the Student Teachers*

The participants in this study consisted of 14 student teachers of the original 24 who had persisted until graduation in a NTEP. There were 12 women and two men, and their ages ranged from 20 to 50 years. Most of the students were between 26 and 45 (11/14). Two were between 20 and 25, and one person was between 46 and 50 years.

Most of the participants had taken their elementary schooling on the reserve (9/14). Two had attended both public and reserve schools. Another two had gone only to public schools, and one person had attended both residential and reserve schools. Most of the student teachers had left their reserves and attended public high schools (9/14). One participant attended a residential high school near a town, and three respondents took upgrading courses. Only one of the participants reported having no secondary schooling. Six of the student teachers had completed grade 12, and one had OAC (Ontario Academic Credits). Another six participants reported having grade 9 or 10. After high school most of the student teachers had taken postsecondary training such as classroom assistant (11/14). Three reported having taken no further training; however, two of these people had grade 12 or higher. In summary, most of the participants were women aged between 31 and 35. They had taken their elementary schooling on the reserves and gone to a town to complete their high school education. Finally, most of the student teachers had taken postsecondary training.

Many of the participants in the NTEP found it difficult to manage the coursework and their other duties at the same time, which led to thoughts of dropping out. However, these student teachers did persist, and they reported five characteristics that helped them to complete the two-year program. The most frequently stated personal quality was goal orientation (8/14). One woman wrote, "I set my goals about four years ago." Another student commented, "There was one thing on my mind and that was to complete my dream of becoming a teacher." The second most important personal characteristic was persistence (6/14). A student stated, "I just reminded myself of what my dad used to tell me: finish what you start." Self-confidence, flexibility, and determination were also reported as personal traits that assisted the students to complete the NTEP and graduate. The students

ascribed these personal characteristics as having some importance in relation to their success.

### *Program Elements*

An important program element that contributed to the persistence of the students was the presence of their mentor teacher. Nine of the students reported that their mentor teachers provided moral support. One student wrote, "She told me to keep going and complete the course." Another woman stated that her mentor teachers "encouraged me to go on." Mentor teachers also provided feedback to the student teachers as they were learning the practical aspects of being a teacher. Some of the students found that the daily feedback and suggestions for improvement given by their mentor teachers assisted in their development as teachers.

The second program element that students found beneficial to their growth as a professional was the Reflective Seminar given by the Northern coordinator on Friday afternoons. All but one of the student teachers said that this course had a positive impact on their development as a teacher. Respondents said that the course helped them to understand what goes on in classrooms (3), to reflect in general and about their personal goals (3), to learn more about their pupils (2), to obtain information about schools and Native education (2), to prepare them for the practica, and to think positively about life (1). Students generally found that this course met their needs.

The third element of the program organization that benefited the student teachers was the presence of peers in the community. Whenever there was more than one student teacher in a community, they were encouraged to support each other. Four respondents reported that the students in their own communities provided one another with moral support. A woman wrote that the other students were "very supportive, and very positive. They made me feel that if they can do it, so can I." Some students also stated that the students in their communities helped each another with the coursework (4/14). A participant said, "Sandy Lake was excellent because there were five of us who helped each other out when there were any problems." A woman also commented that when they did their practice teaching in different communities "it was comforting to know each other when we go out."

The fourth program element was the presence of the two coordinators located in Sioux Lookout and Ottawa. Eight of the students found the coordinators helpful in solving problems and in providing support and encouragement. However, two students wrote that the coordinators were not helpful, and four others had no comment.

The students reported that the above aspects of the organization of the NTEP contributed to their success. Hence program elements played a role in assisting the students in completing the requirements of the NTEP and to graduate.

### *Personal Support*

All 14 students reported that family members supported them in remaining in the program. A young woman wrote, "My family has been a huge support, always providing a shoulder to cry on, or a wall to yell at." For some married women husbands provided much needed moral and active support. One woman stated,



"Mostly my husband has provided me with my support. He gave me a lot of help to look after my family. He is very patient and understands." Other sources of support were friends (7/14) and mentor teachers (5/14). Some of the student teachers also said the Band Council, the Education Director, and other teachers at the schools gave them moral support to complete the program. The students reported that having a personal support network was an important variable that contributed to their success.

In summary, the student teachers in this NTEP were motivated to become teachers for altruistic reasons. They wanted to help their people. Most of the participants had considered dropping out of the program, primarily because the work load was time-consuming in view of their other responsibilities. The variables of personal support, program elements, and personal characteristics contributed to their decisions to persist until graduation.

### *Discussion and Conclusions*

This research examined the experiences of student teachers living in isolated areas who were enrolled in a two-year community-based NTEP. This NTEP is offered by the University of Ottawa and consists of courses, practice teaching, and work in the classrooms of mentor teachers. In this study the students' reasons for wanting to become teachers were explored, and Tinto's (1975) model of dropout was used to examine the variables related to persistence.

Most of the participants indicated that they wanted to become teachers to help their people by providing quality education that would serve as a base for cultural survival and economic advancement. The relationship between education and the socioeconomic needs of First Nations people is emphasized in the literature by Leavitt (1991). As well, Stairs (1991) comments that as products of the reserve, Native teachers are able to teach the children about the value system of the community. Hence Native teachers act in the dual capacity of cultural agents and technical educators. Some of the participants also believed that as teachers they could serve as role models for their own pupils. This finding is consistent with those of Mazurek, Mokosch, and Lane (1989) and Smith-Mohamed (1998) who reported on the critical importance of Native students having role models and mentors to guide their personal development. However, unlike those graduates interviewed by Friesen and Orr (1998), these participants did not link the training of Aboriginal teachers to building the capacity for self-government and band control of schools.

The reasons cited by the student teachers for becoming teachers are somewhat consistent with the findings of Howell (1997) who studied women of Indigenous backgrounds who had graduated from a teacher education program in the Mexican state of Oaxaca. The participants of this research indicated that they wanted to become teachers to help their people, as well as to provide for their own families. Not one of the NTEP students in northern Ontario mentioned personal financial reasons for becoming a teacher. This finding was consistent with those of graduates from northern Saskatchewan who were interviewed by Friesen and Orr (1998).

The retention rate of this NTEP was a disappointing 58%, which is not unlike that for other postsecondary programs for Native students (Smith-Mohamed,

1998). During one of the focus groups a student offered that those who had not completed the program were "great people, but lacked confidence and commitment." It is possible that the students who withdrew were not as firmly committed to their goal of becoming teachers as were those who graduated. As well, given that personal support systems were rated so highly by participants, it is also possible that some of them did not have a support network that could provide encouragement and other types of assistance such as babysitting.

Tinto's (1975) model of dropping out or persistence was used as a framework for examining persistence among the 14 student teachers. The findings of this research are consistent with Tinto's three dimensions that contribute to attrition or persistence. Having a personal support network was the most important variable related to the success of many of the students enrolled in the NTEP. In particular, family members seemed to provide both moral and active support that included caring for young children and assisting with domestic duties. The encouragement and assistance of family, mentor teachers, and community members seemed to be most important while courses were being conducted and during practice teaching when the time requirements of the program were heaviest. The importance of moral and active support is also noted by Bilash and Witse (1997) in their recommendations for teacher training programs.

The second most important variable in relation to the students' success was the organization of the program elements. Many of the mentor teachers became role models for the students and encouraged them to remain in the program. The Reflective Seminar facilitated a feeling of connectedness among the students and supported their work in the classrooms. Peers in the community offered moral support and assistance with coursework. Finally, the coordinators, and in particular the Northern coordinator, provided assistance with problems and offered encouragement. As a whole these program elements combined to foster a sense of social and institutional integration.

Personal characteristics is the third variable in Tinto's (1975) model of dropping out or persistence. The two most frequently reported characteristics reported by the participants were goal orientation and persistence. Most of the students in the program had set their goal of becoming a teacher before their enrollment in the NTEP. As well, they had been working toward acquiring experience in the schools and had taken upgrading courses at the postsecondary level in order to qualify for admission.

Therefore, the findings show that having a strong goal orientation and the personal quality of persistence may have promoted feelings of optimism and influenced students' decisions to persist in the program. As well, the sense of academic integration into the program was developed through obtaining good grades and having cordial relations with professors. This sense of academic connectedness with the NTEP may also have contributed to the graduates' persistence. Finally, the degree of social integration as measured by their personal support networks also helped them complete the program. In Tinto's (1975) study those students who persisted had found support among family and friends. The results of this study support Tinto's finding, but with a strong emphasis on the support of family. Essentially, because of their support systems these students were able to



meet the academic requirements. Therefore, it is probably through the interaction of three dimensions that an appropriate context for the successful completion of the NTEP was developed.

From this study follow three recommendations for the development of NTEPs and other professional programs designed for Aboriginal people. First, potential candidates should be encouraged to set goals in regard to their career aspirations and should be counseled on the steps to be taken to attain their goal. This would include education and relevant experience. Specifically, adolescents and adults should be encouraged to complete their secondary schooling. They should also have at least one year of experience in a school that involves working directly with children. Second, community-based pre-professional programs should be offered to First Nations people so that they will develop confidence in doing postsecondary work through distance education. Taking courses through distance education requires good study skills and the ability to manage multiple tasks simultaneously. Third, applicants to teacher education programs or other professional programs should be informed of the importance of having a strong personal support network, particularly if the person has young children. The critical importance of moral and active support by family and friends for the student teachers must be emphasized. Fourth, community-based programs should be organized so that the components promote institutional integration and facilitate the social connectedness of the students. This type of structure appears to support persistence among the students.

In conclusion, the control of education by First Nations people is seen as an important step leading toward the achievement of political, cultural, and economic goals. Having certificated Native teachers who can instruct the children in their own language and in their own schools is an obvious beginning point in the process. Hence the need is emphasized for First Nations people and universities to work together in providing teacher education programs that not only meet the requirements of the clients and the faculties, but also facilitate a sense of connectedness among the participants. As well, the students themselves should have an appropriate educational background and understand the importance of goal orientation, persistence, and a strong support network. These personal, social, and institutional elements appear to support persistence among First Nations student teachers living in isolated communities so that they may achieve their goal of becoming teachers.

#### *Acknowledgments*

I would like to thank the members of the Sioux Lookout District Program Management Committee and the 14 graduates for their support in conducting this study.

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