

Alberta's Aboriginal Teacher Education Program: A Little Garden Where Students Blossom

Christine Martineau
University of Alberta

Evelyn Steinhauer
University of Alberta

Randolph Wimmer
University of Alberta

Elizabeth Vergis
University of Alberta

Angela Wolfe
University of Alberta

Aboriginal teacher education programs have existed in Canada for four decades. Their primary purpose is to increase the number of Aboriginal teachers in Canadian schools so more relevant and effective education can be provided for Aboriginal children than what federal and provincial schooling has offered them in the past. This article presents the results of an examination of the Aboriginal Teacher Education Program (ATEP) at the University of Alberta that took place between 2011 and 2015. The study examined the reasons why people enrol in ATEP, their experiences both in higher education and in ATEP specifically, the perceived adequacy of their preparation as teachers, and their experiences as beginning teachers in both provincial and band-controlled schools. It continues and expands on previous work with the Indian Teacher Education Program at the University of Saskatchewan.

Our findings suggest that Aboriginal teachers often enter the teaching profession in response to the need for more effective and appropriate education for Aboriginal children, and that ATEP is adequately preparing them to provide culturally relevant and equal educational opportunities for Aboriginal children. Our participants' experiences as students in ATEP were overwhelmingly positive and culturally affirming. We conclude that ATEP is a high-calibre program that is making important contributions to improving education for Aboriginal peoples at all levels, and that it can serve as an exemplar for teacher education programs across Canada that have the same goal.

Introduction

Teacher preparation programs aimed specifically at increasing the number of Aboriginal teachers in Canada, in an effort to make education more relevant and effective for Aboriginal students, began to appear in the 1970s in response to the National Indian Brotherhood's 1972 policy paper *Indian Control of Indian Education* (Kirkness, 1986). In an early review of the literature on Aboriginal education, Kirkness (1986) stated unequivocally that "Indian teachers are critical to the realization of quality education for the Indian population" (p. 47). She asserts that Aboriginal teachers are best equipped to meet the needs of Aboriginal children with respect to Aboriginal identity, traditions, psychology, culture, language, and history because of their common ancestry and experiences. In the four decades since their establishment, understanding of the relevance and need for Aboriginal teacher education programs continues to grow, and is particularly critical to current and ongoing efforts at improving educational experiences and outcomes for Aboriginal students.

The purpose of this research project was to continue and expand our¹ previous work (Wimmer, Legare, Arcand, & Cottrell, 2009) with teacher education for Aboriginal peoples by examining the experiences of Aboriginal teachers who graduated from the Aboriginal Teacher Education Program (ATEP) at the University of Alberta. As Wotherspoon (2007) notes, "teachers' perspectives and voices are often absent from, or have a low profile within, general discourses on educational improvement for Aboriginal people" (p. 64). He further states that teachers' accounts of their experiences "do not necessarily add anything substantially new to our understanding of the complex educational realities for Canada's Aboriginal people" (Wotherspoon, 2007, p. 68). While we agree that teachers' voices are often missing from the discourse on improving education for Aboriginal students, we also believe that they have the potential to significantly impact our understanding of the educational reality of Aboriginal people in Canada. We would argue that no one sees that educational reality in motion more than teachers, and their perceptions of that reality should form a substantial source of information for policy-making and programming geared to meeting the needs of Aboriginal learners. This is particularly true with respect to the voices of Aboriginal teachers, given that they are Aboriginal learners, too, and can make important contributions to our understanding of the needs of Aboriginal students.

Aboriginal teachers have all been Aboriginal students and have experienced first-hand the many negative aspects of schooling that impact Aboriginal people. They are also the exemplars for Aboriginal children

because they have successfully navigated the education system far enough to obtain a university degree. In this respect, they form part of the core of the trend that educators, policy makers, and Aboriginal people in Canada want to see grow out of the many reforms that are currently underway in Aboriginal educational policy and practice across the country.

In our work to improve teacher education in ways that address the needs of Aboriginal peoples (Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, 1996), to express the commitments that our faculties of education have made to Aboriginal education (Association of Canadian Deans of Education, 2010), and to redress the deleterious impacts of colonial educational policies and practices (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015), we believe that the perspectives and experiences of Aboriginal teachers are integral to this work. Kitchen, Cherubini, Trudeau, and Hodson (2009) agree that "The personal experiences of Aboriginal teachers should form the basis for the effective preparation of Aboriginal teachers" (p. 369). This belief formed the foundation of our purpose in this research: to listen to what Aboriginal teachers have to say about their experiences, both as students and as teachers working with Aboriginal students. The experiences that teachers shared with us have important implications for ATEP, but they also provide lessons for teacher education and for educators at all levels about the experiences of Aboriginal students from elementary through post-secondary schools, and of Aboriginal teachers in both public and band-operated schools.

The scope of this project included collaborative work with current students in ATEP and conversations with volunteer informants from the pool of 175 beginning teachers who graduated from ATEP. We conducted a total of 15 in-depth conversations with participants and a telephone/email survey with 44 additional participants, drawn from a pool of 85 graduates within the last four cohorts to complete ATEP. The objectives of this study were twofold. First, we sought out quantitative data to identify statistical and demographic data about ATEP graduates, including the number of teachers who have graduated from ATEP, where and what subjects they are teaching, and how long they have been in their current positions. Second, we employed qualitative methods to understand the following: what brings people to apply to ATEP; Aboriginal student experiences in higher education and in ATEP specifically; and the experiences of new teachers in the first years.

Situating the Research

In Canadian higher education, Marker (2004) stresses that there is very little research that deals with the experiences of Indigenous people in

post-secondary education. He notes “a shortage of writing about Indigenous reality in the literature on higher education. The issues for First Nations are complex and embedded in cross-cultural questions that, up to now, have evaded many scholars of higher education” (Marker, 2004, p. 187). He goes on to say that, “If universities wish to recruit and retain First Nations undergraduate and graduate students, they must work with Aboriginal faculty and staff, who provide the direct link to the First Nations communities” (Marker, 2004, p. 186). In her study examining the perceptions of Aboriginal post-secondary students in Atlantic Canada, Timmons (2013) identifies some of the barriers and supports that these students encountered in their post-secondary educational experiences. The barriers they faced included the challenge of leaving a small community to pursue higher education, financial difficulties, and the racism and prejudice that they felt occurred and was unchecked by institutions of higher learning. Some of the supports they identified were family and peer support, spaces designated for Aboriginal students to gather and access support, and feeling like they belong at university or college.

In the province of Alberta, the post-secondary educational needs of Aboriginal people are particularly urgent for a number of reasons. According to Marshall (2008), the demand for university degrees in Canada will significantly increase over the next decade due to both an increase in the size of the 18 to 29 year-old age group and an increasing rate of university attendance. Marshall (2008, p. 4) states that this demand “will be most evident in places like Alberta where the youth participation rate in university education is the lowest in the country” and “in all provinces where first nations youth are underrepresented in university-level education”. The reality of current demographic patterns in Canadian schools also means that there is a compelling need for higher education, including teacher education, to become more responsive to the needs of Aboriginal peoples. Tymchak (2001) stresses that there is a significant change that is taking place in many parts of Canada with respect to the growth in school-aged children of Aboriginal ancestry. For example, in the province of Saskatchewan it is estimated that, by 2016, Aboriginal people will represent 46.4% of the school-aged population (Tymchak, 2001). In Canada, Aboriginal children comprised 5.2% of the total student population in 2006, while only 2.7% of Aboriginal people were teachers (Ryan, Pollock, & Antonelli, 2009).

There is also a growing universal demand for well-prepared professionals more generally (Cochran-Smith, 2003; Cross & Israelit, 2000; Ralph, Walker, & Wimmer, 2008). Society and communities delegate to those responsible for professional education the task of preparing its teachers,

doctors, lawyers, and other professionals, and their status and responsibility are acquiring an increased sense of importance and urgency (Aguayo, 2004; Cochran-Smith & Zeichner, 2005; Ziv, 2002). This imperative is particularly evident in the preparation of Indigenous teachers and in the preparation of non-Aboriginal teachers who may be teaching an ever-increasing diverse Aboriginal population (Heimbecker, Minner, & Prater, 2000; Herbert, 2003; Hill, 1998; Ryan, Pollock, & Antonelli, 2009). In Alberta, the "Roles and Mandates Policy Framework for Alberta's Publicly Funded Advanced Education System" (Alberta Advanced Education and Technology, 2007) states that Alberta's post-secondary institutions have clear direction on their roles in providing Albertans with accessible, affordable and quality advanced education. Our study focuses on the quality of advanced education for Aboriginal post-secondary students.

As provincial education departments across Canada create policies to address the significant gap in achievement between non-Aboriginal and Aboriginal Canadians, teacher education remains an essential element of educational reformation efforts (Cherubini, 2011; Coalition for the Advancement of Aboriginal Studies, 2002; Kanu, 2011; Kirkness, 1986; Ledoux, 2006; Neeganagwedgin, 2013; Vetter & Blimkie, 2011; Witt, 2006; Wotherspoon, 2007). There are two primary foci in restructuring teacher preparation with respect to Aboriginal education: (1) to educate non-Aboriginal teachers about the experiences and needs of Aboriginal children; and (2) to increase the number of Aboriginal teachers. With respect to the latter, Aboriginal teacher education programs (TEPs) have a key role to play in the effort (Hesch, 1996; Kirkness, 1986). As teacher education institutions and programs across Canada examine their roles in changing the educational experiences and outcomes for Aboriginal students, Aboriginal TEPs have a great deal to offer in terms of leadership, modelling, and sharing of the lessons they have learned since these programs first began to appear in the 1970s.

The commitment to creating change for Aboriginal learners is evident in the 2010 release of the "Accord on Indigenous Education" prepared by the Association of Canadian Deans of Education (ACDE), which recognizes that the ACDE "has a role and responsibility to expand educators' knowledge about and understanding of Indigenous education" (p. 2). It outlines the vision, operating principles, and goals that ACDE developed to fulfill this responsibility to Indigenous education in Canada. The accord contains 32 goals under nine headings, designed to achieve its vision: "that Indigenous identities, cultures, languages, values, ways of knowing, and knowledge systems will flourish in all Canadian learning settings" (Association of Canadian Deans of Education, 2010, p. 4). The goals of the accord

that are most relevant to the role of teacher education in ameliorating education for Aboriginal people include the following:

- To promote comprehensive teacher candidate and faculty programs that create meaningful opportunities for learning about and practicing Indigenous pedagogies and ways of knowing.
- To promote partnerships with Indigenous learners, their families, and their communities to improve Aboriginal education awareness and knowledge for all educators and teacher candidates.
- To increase ways that all Canadian teacher education programs and education partners work cooperatively for quality Aboriginal teacher education and teacher education programs that meet the needs of Indigenous learners.
- To create and mobilize research knowledge, including Indigenous epistemologies, in order to transform Aboriginal education, teacher education, continuing professional education, and graduate programs. (Association of Canadian Deans of Education, 2010, pp. 6-8)

Furthermore, signatories of the accord are asked to “share their progress, challenges, and successes in implementing this Accord in order to learn from and to help each other” (Association of Canadian Deans of Education, 2010, p. 4). As such, focusing our research on an Aboriginal TEP meets the challenge that the Association of Canadian Deans of Education’s accord has set out for Canadian education scholars and institutions. The publication of our findings is also timely in that the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (2015) released its final report, including 94 calls to action “to redress the legacy of residential schools and advance the process of Canadian reconciliation” (p. 1). By focusing our research on Aboriginal teachers and teacher preparation at the University of Alberta, we are enacting and advancing the process of reconciliation in Canada in that Indigenous knowledges, epistemologies, ontologies, and experiences provide the foundation for our research.

Methodology

Conducting research in an Aboriginal community should be considered a privilege and an honour, and this responsibility should not be taken lightly. It must be acknowledged that when we go into Aboriginal communities we are drawing upon their inherent knowledge, and that this reflects their morals and beliefs. Their natural laws of love, respect, honesty, humility, and truth must be adhered to. This can be done by establishing relationships with people in the community. Therefore, our research project is built

on the principle of connectedness or relationality, which is central to Aboriginal epistemology. Stan and Peggy Wilson (1998) describe this concept as a world view where the individual is related to all living organisms. Smith (1999) and Battiste (2000) both tell us that Indigenous peoples identify themselves in relation to their ancestors and situate themselves in relationship to others and to the geography of their traditional lands. LaDuke (2005) goes so far as to say that we are nothing on our own. Steinhauer (2011) states that:

As an Aboriginal researcher I am always conscious about being respectful and making sure that I will not bring harm to anyone in the process. I realize that I have a tremendous responsibility because I am not only doing this research for myself, but more importantly I am doing it for and with the Aboriginal communities. I must also remember that I am the person who will be ultimately responsible for the impact that this project may have on the community, and I must take every possible precaution to ensure good ethical work is always being done. (personal communication)

We acknowledge and accept this responsibility, not only to represent the data fully and accurately, but also to ensure that the primary beneficiaries of the research are Aboriginal people and communities, in accordance with the principles of Indigenous research methodology (Steinhauer, 2007; Weber-Pillwax, 1999).

Our research intentionally engaged Indigenous knowledge systems in its approach. In keeping with the respect that is due to the knowledge holders—the beginning teachers and the communities ATEP works with—it sought to let the knowledge be told, to reflect on it and understand it, and then to integrate that learning into the policies and practices of teacher education and higher education more generally. We believe our approach to be fundamentally different from more mainstream academic paradigms where it is researchers who discover or create new knowledge based on their inquiry with research participants. As Weber-Pillwax (1999) asserts, Indigenous research must be knowingly grounded “in the lives of people as individual and social beings, and not on the world of ideas” (p. 42). To this end, knowledge was sought through what we describe as *conversations* rather than interviews, which allowed the data to emerge from, and therefore be grounded in, individuals’ experiences. This is consistent with how other research in Aboriginal education has been conducted where “conversation with Aboriginal teachers is a useful way to gain insight into the stories about their lives and how their lives impact upon their teaching because it is based on a two-way flow of ideas and does not place the researcher in a position of privilege (Friesen & Orr, as cited in St. Denis, Bouvier, & Battiste, 1998, p. 19). We have conducted this research with the belief that we, as researchers, are partners with our participants, and that

it is participants' knowledge and perspectives that are the foundation of the new knowledge this project contributes to the field of Indigenous educational research.

Methods and Data Sources

We collected both qualitative and quantitative data over a four-year period, from May 2011 to October 2015. We collected qualitative data through conversations with teachers during three scheduled periods in May 2011, August 2015, and October 2015, as well as more informal conversations at various events that we held over the course of the project. Quantitative data were collected in two ways. We surveyed ATEP graduates who enrolled in ATEP after 2009 to gather detailed data on their current teaching positions. We attempted to contact 85 graduates from the four cohorts who completed their degree after 2009. A total of 44 people (52%) replied and participated in the survey. We also obtained statistical data on ATEP graduates, from the inception of the program in September 2002 to the most recent convocation in June 2014, from the Office of the Registrar's data sources in PeopleSoft at the University of Alberta. These data were collected during the period from September 2014 to August 2015. These data were sorted and analyzed according to the categories posed in the research questions, and the results were recorded as sums, proportions, and averages, depending on the question. Qualitative data were sought through guided conversations conducted with a total of 14 Aboriginal ATEP graduates. Of these, nine teach in band-controlled schools, four teach in provincial schools, and one is currently in a master's degree program after teaching in a band school for five years. Conversations were recorded and transcribed by a professional transcriptionist, and were then analyzed using a content analysis method to determine themes, issues, ideas, and tensions.

Research Findings

Here we present our research findings, beginning with an overview of the program and then followed by both a demographic profile of ATEP graduates and an overview of their current teaching assignments. Next, we present the data that emerged in response to the conversations we had with ATEP graduates about their experiences in higher education, why they chose ATEP, what their experiences were like in ATEP, and their experiences teaching in the first few years. The data are organized according to the guiding research questions.

Overview of the Program

The Aboriginal Teacher Education Program (ATEP) at the University of Alberta was established in 2001 with funding from the Alberta government (Aboriginal Teacher Education Program, 2012). In partnership with regional colleges throughout northern Alberta, it offers a Bachelor of Education (BEd) degree program with a specialization in elementary education. Students must take their first 60 credits (two years of study) before enrolling in ATEP for the final two years of their degree. ATEP's partner colleges—Blue Quills First Nations College, Northern Lakes College, Maskwacis Cultural College, and Portage College—work closely with ATEP to offer the appropriate prerequisite courses for students wishing to enrol in ATEP to earn their BEd degree. The delivery structure of the program consists of three terms per year (fall, winter, spring) using a combination of face-to-face and online instruction through eClass (using the Moodle learning platform). The intent of the program is to allow individuals to complete their degree “while maintaining community, family, and cultural connections” (ATEP, 2012), with the overall goal of increasing the number of Aboriginal teachers in classrooms.

The degree requirements in ATEP are the same as they are for the on-campus BEd degree in elementary education. Courses are taught by University of Alberta faculty and sessional instructors. What differentiates ATEP from the standard on-campus degree program, aside from being a community-based program, is its dual focus on increasing the number of Aboriginal teachers in the province and on effectively preparing teachers to successfully meet the needs of Aboriginal students, particularly those living in northern Alberta (ATEP, 2012). ATEP works diligently to ensure that program requirements, instruction, and experiences are grounded in an Aboriginal worldview, and focused on improving the educational experiences and outcomes of Aboriginal children in Alberta. Students take the program as part of a cohort group associated with the partner college in which they begin their studies.

Demographic Profile of ATEP Graduates

To date, 175 people have completed their BEd degree through ATEP in 10 cohorts. Four of the cohorts were offered in partnership with Blue Quills First Nations College, four cohorts were offered at Northern Lakes College, one cohort has been completed at Maskwacis Cultural College, and one cohort was completed at Portage College. In addition to establishing the total number of ATEP graduates, we were also able to collect and analyze data on the number of graduates who are Aboriginal (Status Indian, Métis, Bill C31, Inuit), the number of female versus male graduates, and the pro-

portion of individuals who graduated with distinction (who achieved a GPA of 3.5 or higher). Of the 175 graduates, 103 (59%) are Aboriginal and 72 (41%) are non-Aboriginal. In 8 of the 10 cohorts, Aboriginal students made up the majority of the group. The only cohort that consisted solely of Aboriginal students was the sixth cohort at Blue Quills First Nations College. The average age of students when they applied to ATEP was 35, while the range of age at application was from 20 to 58. These data present a substantial differential in the number of males versus females who enrol in ATEP. Males accounted for only 13 out of the 175 graduates (7%), while a staggering 102 graduates (93%) are women. Finally, it is noteworthy that 39 of the 175 students (22%) graduated with distinction.

Teaching Profile of Graduates

Information on whether or not ATEP graduates are teaching, where they are teaching, and how long they have been in their current positions was gathered through a survey of students who completed ATEP after 2009. Of the 85 graduates from these four cohorts, 47 (55%) responded. 37 (79%) of the 47 graduates in the sample reported that they are currently teaching. A further 8 respondents (17%) reported that they are currently substitute teaching, while 2 (4%) are not teaching. This means that 45 out of 47 (96%) of respondents are currently teaching in some capacity. The two graduates who reported that they are not currently teaching both indicated that this was by choice. Of the 37 respondents who indicated that they are teaching (but not as a substitute), 27 (73%) reported teaching in a public school, while 9 (24%) reported teaching in a band-controlled school. Only one respondent is teaching at a post-secondary institution. Despite specializing in elementary education in ATEP, 33% of graduates surveyed are teaching junior high school and/or high school subjects, and one (3%) is teaching at the post-secondary level.

What follows are the qualitative data that emerged in response to the conversations we had with ATEP graduates about their experiences in higher education, why they chose to enrol in ATEP, what their experiences were like in the program, their experiences as beginning teachers, and their perceptions of their level of preparedness to teach.

Aboriginal Student Experiences in Higher Education: A Little Brown Speck

Two participants talked about their experiences as Aboriginal students in higher education before entering ATEP. Diane began her post-secondary education through Northern Lakes College at one of the larger campuses. She completed her first two years of a combined Bachelor of Education and Bachelor of Native Studies program and then transferred to the University

of Alberta in Edmonton. When she arrived in the city, she got lost and was terrified by the prospect of living there. She decided that she was not moving and therefore not going to school, so she moved back home and took a position as an education assistant in her community. It was not until the ATEP opportunity came around several years later that Diane was able to complete her degree without having to move to the city.

Loretta also shared her brief experience at the University of Alberta. She was enrolled in the Bachelor of Education program on campus but she only lasted for one term:

I was way older than my peers so that was a learning experience for me. It was sink or swim. And I attended class every single day on time. I felt so alone, so isolated. I felt like a little brown speck in a sea of white. I was the only one bobbing there and I had no support, nobody, so I sank. And that was for 4 months that I was here. I went back home. It didn't work. (Loretta²)

Loretta went to Blue Quills First Nations College for a year after her experience at the University of Alberta. She chose Blue Quills because it is a First Nations college and she enjoyed her time there. Loretta thinks that she would have survived going to school in the city if she would have had someplace where she could form relationships with people like herself. She said, "Because I was no different than some of the students I teach when I came here. I just couldn't do it. I bombed on all of my exams. I passed all of my coursework, did all of my assignments, and my exams, I failed every one" (Loretta).

Reasons for Choosing ATEP: To Give our Children a Chance

In response to why they chose to enrol in ATEP, many participants first discussed their reasons for pursuing a Bachelor of Education degree. The motivation for becoming a teacher, for some, was to pursue a lifelong dream, while others felt like the opportunity was an answer to a prayer or a result of the stars lining up in their favour. Many participants talked about the importance of being able to pursue a degree while remaining in or near their home communities in the north. The two graduates who spoke about their disastrous attempts to attend university in the city believed their lack of success was because they were so far from home and family. Several participants explained that the circumstances were just right when the opportunity to enrol in ATEP came along. They wanted a career path and ATEP offered them a viable one.

For many participants, that ATEP is grounded in an Aboriginal worldview and is committed to preparing high quality teachers to work with Aboriginal children was particularly important. It offered them an opportunity to pursue higher education in a culturally familiar environment,

learn about their own history and culture, and prepare to work in their own communities. A final motivation that graduates offered for enrolling in ATEP was to give Aboriginal children a chance at a quality education void of the stereotypes, labels, and biases that often plague their educational experiences. They believe that Aboriginal children need Aboriginal teachers who understand them in ways that non-Aboriginal teachers cannot, and who can serve as role models for them. Grace said, "I wanted our children to have a chance, to just give them a chance, with no biases, no stereotypes being thrown at them all the time." Diane sees the urgency of need for more Aboriginal teachers to meet the needs of Aboriginal children: "Our children are crying for us. Even with all this suicide, it's so sad, and I strongly believe that it's because our own people aren't teaching and showing them the way that they need to be shown." Some participants believed that the benefits of having more Aboriginal teachers is essential not only for children, but also for Aboriginal communities, in general, because it is an opportunity for adults to become educated and find meaningful employment in their own communities, where job opportunities are often very slim.

Student Experiences in ATEP: One Blade of Grass

In describing their experiences in ATEP, participants talked about the quality of instruction they received, the experience of being part of a small cohort, the cultural foundations and teachings, family support, and the opportunities for personal growth that it provided them. Most participants talked about the quality of instruction they received as being superior and more personal than they would have experienced in a larger program. They stated that their instructors were very knowledgeable, understanding, supportive, approachable, and excellent overall. Their Aboriginal instructors and professors especially impacted their experiences because having shared cultural backgrounds and experiences made students feel accepted and understood, and because they were able to form relationships with them. One participant said that she felt less intimidated by her Aboriginal instructors than she did with her non-Aboriginal instructors. Another stated that he could sit and listen to the instructors for a long time because they were so wise, focused, and clear, and they believed in what they were doing.

Being part of a small cohort for the full two years of the program made each participant's ATEP experience comfortable and supportive. Participants spoke about the close friendships they made in the program and the support, encouragement, and learning opportunities that being in a cohort provided them. Lisa believes that the cohort model contributed to every

student's success because it allowed the students to really get to know one another and relate through their common experiences. The comfort level in the cohort helped students deal with their struggles and it helped them to develop their interpersonal skills, as well. Barb contends that she learned how to voice her opinion in the group and to stand up for what she believes in as a result. Joanne also talked about the importance of working together because they "were all in the same boat" and their common struggles brought them closer together. Several talked about their cohort as a family that supported them through academic and personal struggles as they completed the program together.

Being in a teacher education program that is grounded in First Nations cultures and ways of knowing was important to the participants for professional and personal reasons. Professionally, it gave students an advantage over their mainstream counterparts, relative to working in a First Nations community. They learned first-hand about cultural protocols, they learned how to adapt mainstream curriculum and assessment to fit Aboriginal learners, and many had the opportunity to learn how to teach a First Nations language. They had the benefit of learning from many leading Aboriginal scholars and experiencing Indigenous pedagogy from a student's perspective. For some participants who did not grow up in a culturally-rich First Nations environment, the benefits were much more personal in that they were learning about themselves and their own history and culture as Aboriginal people. The cultural knowledge and experiences they gained in ATEP empowered several graduates, giving them the strength and courage necessary to stand up for themselves and for Aboriginal children.

Three participants talked about the role their families played in their experiences and in their ultimate success within ATEP. The support they received came in the way of financial assistance, childcare, housework, and continuous encouragement. A few also shared some of the ways that they grew personally during their ATEP experience. One graduate said that ATEP taught her how to be a hard worker, how to prioritize her responsibilities, and helped her to mature as a person. She also said that it gave her a tremendous sense of existential purpose. She developed a new perspective in ATEP by learning to look at herself differently. ATEP taught her to step out of her comfort zone and look inside first, rather than looking outside all the time.

A final area of personal growth for one participant was the new understanding she gained about institutions and what they can provide to students when they offer programs like ATEP. Before being in ATEP, she viewed institutions like the university as a brick, no different from any

other brick. They were closed and hard, and offered no openings for personal growth. She says that ATEP was “a little garden in that institution that started to grow out of a little pore in that brick! Like the grass you see that’s growing through the cracks in the pavement and you think, how is that possible? One blade of grass” (Loretta). Finding an organic place within an institution that allowed her to grow as a human being really opened Loretta’s eyes to the possibilities she could create for her own students. She learned that “there is a place there in the institutional environment that allows you to grow, allows you to look inside yourself, and to look out and make connections with the world *holistically*” (Loretta). Loretta characterizes ATEP as a program that allowed her to blossom as a person and taught her how to offer her students the same opportunity.

Beginner Teachers’ Experiences: Let’s Deal With My Reality

Most ATEP graduates begin teaching as soon as they complete their degrees and much of what they shared with us centred on surviving the first year as teachers. Some participants also talked about the difficulties they face in using Aboriginal approaches in their teaching. For many of the ATEP graduates who teach in band-controlled schools on reserves, their realities as new teachers are much different than that of teachers in provincial schools. Regardless of the difficulties they each faced in their first years in the classroom, however, all participants stressed that the upside of teaching is the relationships that they form with students.

Grace recounts how she felt in her first year as a teacher in her home community: “Well, I really didn’t have any support. It was like I was just on survival mode, flying by the seat of my pants, and hope I’m doing justice for my students.” Lisa believes that as “beginning teachers, it’s that you’re really, really doing the best that you can with what you’ve got, all the time.” She also talked about a phenomenon that most new teachers probably experience but do not necessarily admit, which is to never want to say no. The pressure of being new in the profession, combined with the added weight of worrying about certification and contract renewal, make beginning teachers, at times, take on more than they feel they’re able to handle and leaves them feeling burnt out by the end of the year.

Loretta talked at length about her first two years because her teaching assignment has been really challenging. She says that she entered her career after graduation assuming that she would be teaching elementary students, since that is what she was prepared to teach in ATEP’s elementary specialization. The reality, she soon realized, is that you are placed where you are needed in a school and you have to make the best of it. Loretta’s assignment covers six different subject areas across all grade lev-

els (K-12). She felt as though she was spread a bit thin for a first year teacher with such a diverse assignment. Loretta's second year has not been much different than her first, in terms of her assignment. She finds it difficult to plan for so many subjects at so many different grade levels. She knew that students were her biggest priority but she had also been taught how important it is to teach the curriculum.

What Loretta has learned from her experience is that "you can't teach the curriculum if the child is not ready." She credits surviving her first two years to her love for teaching. She says that her passion for teaching and the difficulty of her assignment have forced her to become a workaholic, at school from 8 o'clock in the morning to 10 o'clock at night most days. The stakes are high for Loretta this year because she is being evaluated for her permanent certification. George believes that how people handle the first years of teaching depends on who they are as individuals. He says that his biggest struggles are finding balance and not comparing himself to other teachers. Chelsea talked about how lucky she was to have support from a fellow ATEP graduate and to have a very good principal who kept tabs on her lesson planning and unit planning throughout the first year.

Being as prepared as possible can help to alleviate the feeling of being overwhelmed by the extensive responsibilities and often difficult realities of teaching. Joanne's advice to other new teachers is "to get your stuff organized before coming into the school year and especially if you don't have a curriculum. You have to be prepared for anything and everything that comes at you. And I've dealt with lots of obstacles this past two years. Lots" (Joanne). Brian also believes that adequate preparation can alleviate the pressures most new teachers face and can help them to better meet their students' needs: "I want to be a master in my curriculum . . . because I think the students look at you and can tell when you're not sure, so you want to come to class feeling confident and prepared every day" (Brian). Many teachers, new and experienced, would no doubt echo his one wish—for more time, to do all of the things that comprise teaching, "like curriculum, connecting with parents, trying to do more in school programs, so that we can connect with students, team building" (Brian). The expression, *so much to do, so little time* adequately summarizes the experiences of many beginning teachers.

Some participants discussed the obstacles they face in bringing Aboriginal approaches into their teaching. For Diane, it's a matter of not offending anyone, but she works hard to bring culture into the classroom despite this worry. Grace's biggest struggle is dealing with the mentality that learning is a rote activity that must focus on reading and writing, rather than using an Indigenous land-based approach to learning. She

wrestles with knowing that Aboriginal students need Aboriginal teaching methods, while listening to the criticisms of more seasoned teachers who believe that teaching in a culturally responsive way takes away from instruction in reading, writing, and arithmetic. Grace disagrees with this position. She learned through ATEP the value of and necessity for incorporating Aboriginal ways into education.

Grace says that "ATEP validated what I used to believe in my heart but was afraid to share" (Grace). She knows that teaching using Indigenous knowledge, perspectives, and methods actually increases students' abilities in their core academic skills. She feels that there is a discrepancy between what Elders want for children, and what the school division and the province want education to look like. Grace compares her own experiences as a student in ATEP to the impact that a culturally-appropriate education could have on Aboriginal students. If students have a strong sense of community belonging, they will be able to leave the community when necessary because they will have back-up, in the same way that she and her ATEP cohort had their own little community to support them in their education. Grace thinks that "community needs to be stronger than the definition of it" (Grace). If children have a strong connection to community, they will always know that they are safe and that they will be welcomed back, no matter what.

For Loretta, teaching from an Indigenous perspective means being more than just a teacher for students: "We are their counsellor, their parent, their nurturer, we are their healer, their confidante. We are many things to that student, not just a teacher." One of the biggest issues that she sees Aboriginal students struggling with is their identity as Aboriginal people. She talks about the impact that discrimination and stereotypes have on Aboriginal children's identity: "they will not succeed in life if they don't know who they are and be proud of who they are and where they come from." Loretta says that many of her students come into the classroom in pieces, and it is her job to help them put themselves together, which she does by approaching teaching from an Indigenous perspective. For Mark, becoming educated as Aboriginal people is akin to becoming a warrior whose weapon is knowledge. The fight, from Mark's perspective, is to recover from the generations of trauma so that future generations do not have to have the same experiences. He wants his students to benefit from the lessons he has learned by being strong in their culture; otherwise, "what are they going to inherit if we continue?"

For the many participants who are teaching in band schools in their own communities, it is both a blessing and a challenge. George feels fortunate to be teaching in his own community. In fact, he is teaching the same

students that he taught during his practicum. He says, "It's just a blessing to be in my home [community]" (George). Other participants who teach on reserve, however, expressed the added difficulties that it presents for them. Many talked about the reality of teaching on a reserve and how it affects their work. Low attendance, students transferring in throughout the year, low parental involvement, and social issues bring another aspect to teaching on reserve that is not common elsewhere.

Barb finds that what her students are facing outside of school can be difficult for her as a teacher: "Sometimes their experiences are really hard to deal with." As a community member, she must also work to physically separate her work from her home life for her own well-being. Mark believes that many of the issues that students are dealing with are the result of historical trauma and that, by understanding this connection, he is better equipped to understand and help his students. Another participant who teaches on reserve relates her reaction to a presenter at a conference she attended. While she really enjoyed the presentation and the ideas put forth, she felt that it was out of touch with her experiences on reserve: "I don't mean to be pessimistic, I don't mean to be, but it was like, girl, you do not know what I am facing. Really, like let's really deal with my reality . . . this may be your reality, but it's not mine" (Lisa).

A final difficulty raised in respect to teaching on reserve is the ostracism that many Aboriginal teachers face when they work in their own communities. Joanne feels demoralized by the treatment she receives from colleagues, some of whom are veteran teachers: "I feel more oppressed by my own people and that's the hardest part. I'm not used to it. I'm not used to feeling oppressed, because I've never, I took myself out of that, that idea, and to feel it again from my own people, it's really hard. It's crushing." To mitigate the impact of her colleagues' treatment on her, Joanne tries to separate her issues with the adults in the community from her experiences with her students—a tall order for anyone to achieve when treatment by your senior colleagues feels "crushing" and oppressive.

All participants talked about the benefits they receive from teaching in terms of the relationships they have formed with students. The participants who teach on reserve were quick to point out the benefits that come with such a difficult position. They were eager to make us understand what keeps them going despite the obstacles they face. Brian likes the fact that he has a lot of freedom to teach the material that he feels is important for his students. He believes that the curriculum itself is less than half of what students need in school. Instead, "it's about relationships" (Brian). His own satisfaction comes from the connections that he makes with students and watching them grow. David also places high value on

connecting to his students and makes this an essential aspect of his teaching: "because if they just show up to class and you just kind of make them do work and not really get to know them . . . there's no connection" (David). Lisa's comments capture both the ups and downs of teaching on reserve:

I'm feeling like I'm drowning. There's times I feel like wow, there's so many issues. But then there's part of me when I'm with them, it's like, wow, they're, I don't know, they're such beautiful kids. And you want to see them succeed . . . in so many different ways. (Lisa)

Despite the difficulties they face as new teachers, the participants understood what they were receiving in exchange for their efforts.

George is grateful for the rewards he receives from teaching, especially for what he learns from his students. Grace loves being with her students as well, especially when she brings cultural traditions and teachings into her classroom. She says that Aboriginal students don't always feel safe in an institution and culture is a way of offering them a different perspective and a different experience in their education. Grace states that ATEP demonstrated to students that they were important, and she is now able to follow that model and show her students how important they are to her. Loretta believes that loving what she does is what helps her get through the challenges. Diane says "My kids love me and I love them" and her reward every day is the love that is evident in their hugs and kisses.

Degree of Preparedness as Beginning Teachers

Some participants felt very well prepared to begin their teaching. Grace felt so prepared and organized that she felt tremendously confident going into the classroom. She also felt that she had the support of her cohort, and ATEP staff and instructors as backup in case she needed it. Phyllis also felt well prepared for the classroom. She said that, once you get into a classroom, "you can truly see all your tools that you learn in ATEP being utilized" (Phyllis). Phyllis was able to reflect back on her courses and apply what she learned to a real-world situation. Looking back, Phyllis said, "I think that ATEP prepared me quite well for my journey" (Phyllis). Diane also talked about how ready she felt to teach as a result of ATEP. She said that what she learned in ATEP "was enough to make us feel comfortable and ready and feel prepared enough to be in the classroom" (Diane). She still uses many of the resources from her coursework in her planning and teaching. Diane credits her ATEP preparation for her success in creating a unit that brings in Cree culture and provides teaching material for every subject area through one unit, using a variety of teaching methods and resources to maximize the learning opportunities in the lesson for students.

Many participants discussed the fact that it is very difficult to prepare teachers for the day-to-day realities of teaching. They talked about the myriad duties outside of teaching itself, such as committees, school events, meetings, and preparation. George characterizes his experience as a new teacher as a "steep learning curve" (George). He is struggling with lesson planning, assessment, and classroom management but, because he is there for the children, he keeps going. George believes that there is nothing that can adequately prepare you to begin teaching because every situation is unique. What has helped him is having ATEP graduates as colleagues and mentors who assure him that his experiences are quite normal and just part of teaching. Only one participant felt that she was completely unprepared to teach. She felt that what was expected of her in the classroom was much different than what she anticipated while doing her courses. Like others, she talked about the amount of paperwork that was required of her as a teacher and the time that she had to put into planning. Additional areas that put added strain on her were classroom management, unit planning, and report cards. It wasn't the teaching, per se, that overwhelmed these new teachers so much as it was all of the other responsibilities that teaching entails.

Discussion

The picture of ATEP that this research reveals is a promising one. In the span of 10 years, it has graduated 175 teachers, both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal, most of whom are teaching in Alberta classrooms. Ninety-six percent of graduates surveyed are currently teaching, either as a classroom teacher (79%) or as a substitute teacher (17%). This is a very high placement rate for ATEP graduates, particularly considering that most enter directly into teaching following graduation. The quality of programming and instruction in ATEP is evident both in the words of graduates themselves and in the fact that 22% of ATEP graduates earned a degree with distinction.

The profile of students who enrol in ATEP is also interesting. Unlike many other Aboriginal teacher education programs, ATEP is not geared solely to Aboriginal applicants. Since its inception in 2002, ATEP has offered its programming to anyone who meets the application criteria for a Bachelor of Education degree at the University of Alberta. While the majority (59%) of graduates from ATEP identify as Aboriginal, a significant proportion (41%) are not Aboriginal. The average age of students when they enrolled in ATEP (35 years old) does not differ significantly between Aboriginal students (age 36) and non-Aboriginal students (age 34). The preponderance of female students (93%) compared to male students (7%)

who have enrolled in ATEP is in keeping with statistics on the professional roles that Aboriginal women traditionally occupy (Hill & Freeman, 1998). In an early study of another ATEP at Queen's University in Ontario, Hill and Freeman (1998) reported that, among Indigenous people in Canada, "education-related training is the third most common type of training after commerce/ administration and health" (p. 5). According to the 1991 Aboriginal Peoples Survey by Statistics Canada, 6.1 % of Aboriginal women were educators compared to 1.6% of Aboriginal men (Hill & Freeman, 1998). Hill & Freeman (1998) attribute this differential to a continuation of the traditional cultural roles of Indigenous women as the primary teachers of children until they reach puberty. It may also be indicative of a generally high proportion of female elementary teachers.

Among the reasons for enrolling in ATEP that our participants shared, those that focused on becoming a teacher to meet the needs of Aboriginal children stood out the most. For some, it was a matter of providing more role models, while others saw the shortfalls of education in meeting the needs of Aboriginal children. They felt that Aboriginal teachers are best equipped to work with Aboriginal students and wanted to be part of the solution. These teachers want Aboriginal children to become educated without having to alter fundamentally who they are, to fit in and to succeed. Some participants also saw ATEP as an opportunity for adults in their communities to pursue further education. The reasons that these participants shared for becoming teachers resonate with the justifications that Kirkness (1986, p. 52) outlined 30 years ago, including an expressed desire of First Nations communities "for the preparation of their people for jobs that would result in improving their communities". Thirty years later, the need for Aboriginal role models and effective teachers for Aboriginal children remains.

Seeing this higher purpose in becoming a teacher that some of our participants shared also echoes what Wimmer, Legare, Arcand, and Cottrell (2009) heard in their study of Aboriginal teachers' experiences in Saskatchewan: "Either directly or indirectly, many teachers expressed a belief that teaching in a band school was part of a larger purpose of taking care of Aboriginal peoples' children" (p. 832). Kitchen et al. (2009) also reported that the Aboriginal teachers they spoke to felt "a strong commitment to serving and protecting their students and Aboriginal communities" (p. 356). They contend that Aboriginal teachers are "situated in the borderlands between languages and cultures, and have important choices to make as they prepare Aboriginal students to walk between two parallel yet very different worlds" (Kitchen et al., 2009, pp. 355-356). This higher calling to serve their own communities may be a significant point

of difference between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal teachers, and their work with the children they serve. It would be interesting to know, for example, if increasing the number of Aboriginal teachers teaching in their own communities is having an impact on reducing teacher turnover, a major problem reported in band schools.

When the teachers we spoke with talked about their experiences in ATEP, they were, without exception, positive accounts. They talked highly about their instructors and the relationships that they were able to form with them. Similarly, Wimmer et al. (2009) found that teachers they spoke with thought "the close personal relationships with ITEP staff provided academic and personal support that was critical to success" (p. 829). Our participants emphasized the importance of having instructors who understand where they were coming from, in terms of culture and lived experience. They felt less intimidated by Aboriginal instructors and professors, and felt that they could share their personal struggles and challenges with them without judgement. They also appreciated the high quality of instruction, extensive knowledge, and commitment that their instructors exhibited.

One of the single most influential aspects of the ATEP program, according to the graduates we spoke with, was the experience of being in a cohort. Participants talked about the friendships they formed, the families they gained, and the tremendous amount of support they received from their cohort members. That they were all sharing the same experience allowed them to really get to know each other and relate to one another about what they were doing. They shared not only their academic struggles with each other, but also their personal difficulties. They supported one another through emergencies and family tragedies, and the day-to-day struggles of life. Many participants attributed their success to the support they received from their cohort in ATEP. Several referred to their cohort as their family, as conveyed similarly by ITEP graduates in Saskatchewan: "Many identified the cohort dimension as the most important component because it provided a critical mass of Aboriginal students to create a degree of safety and security, akin to a sense of family in 'learning with your own people.' (Wimmer et al., 2009, p. 829). For many of our participants, their cohort ties have extended beyond their ATEP experience into their experiences as new teachers, and they still form integral aspects of their support systems.

The Aboriginal cultural foundation of ATEP mattered to the graduates we spoke with, for both professional and personal reasons. Professionally, the first-hand teaching they received from both cultural knowledge-holders and leading Aboriginal academics is invaluable to them in working

with Aboriginal students. Many expressed that they felt better prepared to work in Aboriginal communities and to meet the needs of Aboriginal students than they would have been in a non-Aboriginal program. ATEP is a model of how education should be for Aboriginal students, according to one participant. ATEP also gives students an opportunity to learn about Indigenous issues, such as the importance of Indigenous language retention.

For several graduates, the impact was also very personal. Many talked of how much they learned about their own cultural backgrounds that they did not have opportunities to learn about, prior to ATEP. Some talked about how good it felt to be asked to share their own cultural knowledge with their classmates, and to be encouraged to share their opinions about what they were studying. Wimmer et al. (2009) also heard similar sentiments from ITEP graduates, who felt that the program was culturally affirming and gave them confidence and pride. The cultural basis of ATEP has provided many of its graduates with a strong foundation on which to build, as teachers working in Aboriginal communities, but it has also contributed to many students' personal growth as well, by reconnecting them with their own cultural heritage. As such, ATEP is modelling how to successfully infuse Aboriginal knowledge and perspectives into mainstream curriculum for the benefit of Aboriginal students—a lesson from which all teacher preparation programs could benefit.

The real test of a teacher education program takes place when students become teachers in their own classrooms. Like all beginning teachers, the participants in this study talked about the realities of teaching, including everything from classroom management to not having enough time in a day to get everything done. For many of these new teachers, there are added challenges that are specifically related to teaching in First Nations communities. Low attendance, high academic and social needs, and many other effects of colonization and oppression make this work not only very challenging, but also highly rewarding as well. Some felt like they were doing the best they could as new teachers with little or no support, while others discussed how overwhelmed they felt by the extra responsibilities they have, including record keeping, planning, assessment, and extra-curricular commitments. Several teachers talked about how important it was to plan ahead and be prepared for whatever the day might bring.

An area of significant concern for many of our participants, and for other Aboriginal teachers, is their ability to provide culturally-based learning opportunities for their students. Kitchen et al. (2009) caution that there "is a need to understand the tensions experienced by Aboriginal teachers called upon to serve in the capacity of cultural brokers, even as they strug-

gle with their own identities and come to know themselves as Aboriginal people" (p. 359). They also heard from Aboriginal teachers who felt isolated or marginalized, without the support or resources necessary to provide culturally-appropriate education to Aboriginal students. Some teachers in Wotherspoon's (2007) study also acknowledge the harmful realities that Aboriginal students face, including racism, poverty, domestic issues, inadequate housing, and the absence of opportunities for employment or higher education.

The challenge that our teachers face is that their attempts to use Indigenous pedagogical methods are met with criticism and pressure from colleagues who believe that Indigenous approaches take away from the focus on teaching the curriculum. Wotherspoon (2007) reports a similar sentiment toward Aboriginal pedagogical approaches among many of the teachers he surveyed, where some teachers saw "a high degree of complementarity between reforms to enhance Aboriginal education and broader curricula and teaching duties" (p. 66), while most believed that including Aboriginal programming meant a trade-off that takes away from core curricula. Fortunately, there are some teachers who agree that "the pressing need to connect with students, their cultural heritage, and the difficult circumstances encountered by many students take precedence" over a focus on "core" curriculum only (Wotherspoon, 2007, p. 66). Kitchen et al. (2009) heard similar sentiments from Aboriginal teachers, including one who "strongly believed that promoting healing and cultural pride was necessary to preparing students to learn, and that culture was a foundational element rather than content to be covered during the year" (p. 367). In their study, "culture and cultural identity emerged time and again as central to Aboriginal education that engaged students, connected them to their language and culture, and contributed to healing and development within Aboriginal communities" (p. 367). The importance of teaching in culturally-appropriate ways is made clear by Aboriginal teachers. So, too, is the need for the support and resources necessary to carry out this important work, without unnecessary criticism from colleagues.

A final concern that teachers in our study expressed relates to the realities of teaching in band-controlled schools. Some of these realities are student attendance issues, transfers between provincial and band schools throughout the year, low parental involvement, and ostracism from other teachers and the community. Wimmer et al. (2009) found similar concerns among their participants: "All the teachers, who felt that ITEP had prepared them well for the academic aspects of teaching, said that they experienced difficulties in adjusting to the day-to-day realities of teaching in band schools" (p. 831). They reported that, while ITEP graduates are

familiar with these “complex relationships between teachers, schools, and the community [that] are characteristic of band-controlled environments” (Wimmer et al., p. 842), they did not feel prepared to deal with them as teachers. The authors concluded that, compared to the experiences of other beginning teachers, the level of expectations for new teachers in band-controlled schools is unusually high.

All participants in our study, whether teaching in provincial or band-controlled schools, expressed that the upside of teaching for them is in the relationships that they form with their students. It is these relationships that keep them going through the difficult times as new teachers. Getting to know students and learning how to connect with them so that their educational experiences are meaningful is a pedagogical choice for ATEP graduates. The graduates of ITEP felt similar satisfaction as teachers:

Yet despite these challenges and frustrations, all the teachers expressed high levels of job satisfaction, felt that teaching was the right career choice for them, and took great satisfaction from contributing to the development of the youth in their community. (Wimmer et al., 2009, p. 832).

They all spoke about their “love for the children they work with and how this confirmed their choice of becoming a teacher” (Wimmer et al., 2009, p. 843). Our participants felt a similar confirmation of their choice to become teachers, because of the children they teach.

In talking about how prepared they felt as beginning teachers, our participants’ responses ranged from being very well prepared to not being prepared at all. Those who felt well prepared understood that they could not be prepared for every reality they would face as new teachers, but believed that in ATEP they received enough preparation and a suitably extensive collection of tools to serve them well in their first years. In contrast, both Wimmer et al. (2009) and Kitchen et al. (2009) state that the teachers in their studies found little value in their teacher preparation programs in preparing them to work in Aboriginal communities. Some “questioned the Eurocentric assumptions underlying their education, and stressed the importance of preparing them for teaching a challenging population in ways that are sensitive to Aboriginal languages and culture” (Kitchen et al., 2009, p. 363). Others were concerned with the more practical requirements of the job, including “setting up a classroom, finding resources, maintaining a student register, doing report cards, communicating with parents and resolving conflict, and maintaining an effective learning environment” (Wimmer et al., 2009, pp. 834-835). While most of the participants in our study felt that they were adequately equipped to meet students’ needs in terms of culturally-appropriate teaching, they

were faced with a steep learning curve in the first year, trying to stay on top of everything that was expected of them beyond the actual teaching.

Nearly 30 years ago, Hesch (1996) asked two important questions about the role of Aboriginal teacher education programs:

Are the TEPs producing only new "clerks of the empire," that is, teachers of aboriginal ancestry who will fill the former roles of white teachers and perform the same state- and ideologically determined tasks that schools have always served in relation to First Nations people and other subordinate populations? Or does the production of aboriginal teachers promise new forms of schooling for First Nations children? (p. 269)

What we believe as a result of our work here is that ATEP works hard to provide a teacher education program that meets the needs of its students, and effectively prepares its graduates to meet the needs of their Aboriginal students in schools. These graduates are not merely "clerks of the empire" in new clothing. Our participants have told us that, by increasing the number of Aboriginal teachers and the number of non-Aboriginal teachers who are adequately prepared to teach Aboriginal students, ATEP is changing the form and content of schooling for Aboriginal children.

Conclusion

The role and responsibilities of Aboriginal teacher education programs have not changed since their inception in the 1970s, nor has the need for them. Aboriginal teachers have the unique potential to teach Aboriginal students based on shared cultural, historical, and societal experiences (Kirkness, 1986). Hesch (1996) believes that Aboriginal post-secondary programs such as ATEP are distinctively positioned to be part of an antiracist project by revealing and reclaiming Indigenous knowledges, and working to incorporate them into curricula and pedagogies. What these programs have to struggle against is the hegemony that has been a central feature of education for Aboriginal people in Canada for centuries (Hesch, 1996). This struggle involves more than just the preparation of Aboriginal teachers to work with Aboriginal students. It involves a much wider project of enlightening all Canadian educators about the critical importance of having teachers who understand the history, experiences, and educational needs of Aboriginal children and who are specifically trained to meet those needs. By offering its programming to both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal learners, ATEP is deeply engaged in this larger endeavour. We feel confident that ATEP is a high-calibre program that is making important contributions to changing the educational experiences of Aboriginal students in Alberta and we believe that it is an exemplar for other faculties of education as they work to improve education for Aboriginal people in Canada.

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Notes

¹ See contributing authors' bios at the end of this CJNE issue.

² Because we have used a number of direct quotations from our participants, we have elected not to use the APA citation format of including *personal communication* and the date of each conversation after each quotation to avoid disrupting the flow of the discussion. All quotations are taken from transcripts of conversations that took place in May 2011, August 2015, and October 2015.

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