A bitterly cold day. School was closed. Minus 35 plus a wind chill factor of ten. The wind howled around the corner of my classroom. From the window I enjoyed the scene of a huge pristine field of large, white snowdrifts and sparkling hoar frost on the trees and link fence. A tiny dot of yellow moved into the frosty scene. A kindergarten child dressed in a thin yellow spring jacket, zipper undone, and ragged blue jeans propelled me outside. There were no socks in the slip-on running shoes and no mittens on the hands holding the sharp-edged top from a tomato soup can which she licked like a lollipop. The feeling of severe cold and the outline of this little figure remain embedded in my memory.

Each year of teaching First Nations students in similarly difficult circumstances has deepened my desire to examine and understand why inequity in educational achievement and socio-economic conditions between First Nations students and their classmates exists. Kumashiro (2000) states that researchers need to examine inequities that create difficulties for oppressed groups of people. It has been well documented in various research articles that First Nations people were colonized through the oppression of cultures, languages, family structures, and education. They were forced to learn the way of life of the “colonizing power.” To give a child a warm jacket and drive her home is helpful, but will not affect change to the underlying structures that continue to oppress First Nations people.

The initial research for this project was conducted by myself, a classroom and special needs resource teacher, and Kelly Cooksley, someone who has observed many First Nations children struggle with participation, commitment, and self-confidence in after-school programs. We noted that other children in these programs did not struggle as significantly with these issues, and observed that many First Nations students from various cultural backgrounds have struggled immensely with these same issues in our classrooms. Accreditation statistics during the school year of 1997/98 showed that 90 out of our school’s 325 students received Learning Assistance support for reading or mathematics from three resource teachers. Only 27% of our school population is comprised of First Nations students. Yet 54% of the 90 students receiving Learning Assistance were First Nations students. We asked ourselves, “Why do First Nations students have difficulties in our school?” Kelly and I worked together on our research project to answer this question.

As educators, it was necessary to remind ourselves that “requirements for school success, which involve mastering the school curriculum, learning to speak and write standard English, and exhibiting ‘good’ school behaviors, are interpreted as white society’s requirements” (Ogbu, 1998, p. 178), and that various cultures do have differing objectives and goals for their young. Kirkness (1990) also urges mainstream educators to understand the importance of changing objectives and goals to better correlate with those held by Aboriginal parents. In light of this, we decided to focus on teachers’ and First Nations parents’ expectations for supporting success in school. We wanted to listen to what parents felt was most important for them regarding their children’s education. We completed the research by April 2002 and I wrote our findings.
Literature Which Informed Our Understanding

We undertook this project to look at what Aboriginal parents and teachers of Aboriginal students think is needed to support success for First Nations students. Our brief account of personal experiences and research helps us to understand some of the difficulties experienced by First Nations families today, and, therefore, the legacy of historical events as they are played out in contemporary classrooms.

Mary Lawrence (1996) likens her experiences in residential schools in southern British Columbia to those found in army barracks—one hundred beds in a single room, each with a gray blanket on top. Awakened at 6:30 a.m. by a whistle blowing and a nun yelling to get up, Lawrence would get dressed and go to Mass followed by a breakfast of congealed cold oatmeal at 7:30 a.m. She recalled getting the strap often, because after lights were out, she would be caught in her sister’s bed—a few rows from her own. Lawrence rarely saw her brother due to the separation of males and females in dorms, classes, meals, and during recreation times.

Rosalyn Ing’s (2000) doctoral thesis is a combination of research concerning First Nations people in Canada’s beginning years, and the experiences of First Nations people who either attended or had a parent who attended residential school. The policies and acts passed by the Canadian government in the late 1800s and early 1900s, described in detail in Ing’s thesis, were designed to effect colonization and assimilation of First Nations culture and people, and to suppress Aboriginal culture. Reading this description opened my eyes to a history I had not studied in school or at university.

In addition to these policies, fatal diseases introduced by white men such as smallpox, starvation due to the loss of buffalo, the purposeful introduction of alcohol, and the expulsion of First Nations people from traditional lands caused immense suffering in every part of First Nations peoples’ lives, making them vulnerable to domination by the colonizing power. Centuries-old cultural events were banned and parents were forced to send their children to residential schools where they were forbidden to speak their own languages as part of a plan to assimilate First Nations’ cultures. This loss multiplied over the years, leading eventually to the disintegrations of entire communities where children who came home could no longer speak their parents’ languages, and parents could not speak English.

Hare and Barman (1998) state that children in residential schools spent less time on academic study because they often did chores related to the upkeep of the school. In these schools, an insufficient curriculum was provided, children were hungry because of poor nutrition, cultural and family ties were discouraged, and the identities of the children were purposefully suppressed as First Nations children were taught a “superior culture.” Many First Nations children experienced trauma and witnessed horrific atrocities enacted on their siblings and friends. This made recovery and return to normal life extremely difficult after school was finished. Hare and Barman (1998) cite weak curriculum, poor nutrition, cultural suppression, trauma, and learning a new language as contributors to illiteracy rates for First Nations youth of 40%, compared to rates of 2% for non-Aboriginal Canadian youth in 1921. Clearly, these harsh
conditions led to a serious loss of self-confidence, culture, and identity, which could not be easily retrieved.

Corenblum (1996) reviews many empirical studies involving white children, who are usually in the majority of the population, and Aboriginal children, who are usually in the minority. In these studies, children had to choose between white dolls or native dolls, and select one that looked most like themselves. The results did not change regardless of the age of subject samples, location of studies, time period of research (1974–1986), racial group of experimenters, language used, or children’s accuracy in labeling dolls or pictures.

Native children chose pictures or dolls representing majority group members when answering questions about own and other group members...According to this perspective, minority group children wish to symbolically join the high status majority group, and by so doing, enhance their social identity and maintain self-esteem. According to this perspective, choosing white dolls reflects Native children's desire to close—at least symbolically—the distance between themselves and those whom they perceive to be high status, in-group members. (88)

Corenblum concluded that if the minority feels the majority does not approve of their group, self-esteem and identity can be threatened.

Hare and Barman (1998) describe the “family unit as the center of Aboriginal society” (3). Because families were pulled apart for such a long time, “many of the problems endemic to Aboriginal communities, such as family violence, alcoholism, suicide, and poverty, have their roots in assimilation and colonialism, in which residential schools played a major role” (17). Hare and Barman state “negative attitudes towards schools today” (17) come from the past experiences of generations of First Nations people. They also state “Aboriginal children persevere in educational systems which are paternalistic, racist, and do little to address their needs” (23). External control of funding and curriculum by governments, failure to recognize or value the uniqueness of various First Nations cultures, lack of culture woven into curriculum, and not enough Aboriginal staff in schools are some of the features of schools that Hare and Barman point to as ones that perpetuate racism and the struggle of First Nations to succeed within the institution of schools.

Methods of Inquiry

We used field study methods to collect data on the goals and objectives First Nations families and teachers set for elementary-aged students. We assured parents and teachers about confidentiality within a brief individual presentation about our study. We made ourselves available in person or by phone to answer any questions participants had before committing to the project. Each potential participant was assured that there would be no adverse consequences if they decided not to participate in the project. Consent was voluntary, and participants who agreed to be interviewed were asked to meet with one of the co-investigators for approximately thirty minutes to an hour, and most agreed to have the interview tape-recorded. A letter of consent, including a clear description of our research project, was hand-delivered to participants. We asked five teachers who expressed an interest and had two to four First Nations students in their classrooms to complete an interview. Participating teachers had assignments that ranged from early primary to late intermediate levels.

The First Nations Support Worker was involved in asking parents to participate in this study and in explaining the research to them. Three parents agreed to be interviewed. I wondered if more parents would have agreed if a First Nations person had conducted the interview, or if the interviewer had not been someone from the school system. The parents I interviewed were initially a bit nervous, but towards the end of each interview, felt more comfortable, and seemed pleased to have had an opportunity to express their viewpoint.

Five teachers and three parents represent a very small sample of our school
population, and of a large school system. Although the interviews give a limited amount of information, the information that was gained did provide some answers to how we could support success for Aboriginal students in our school.

Research Questions

The three parents and five teachers were asked similar questions. Parents were asked to tell us about their own experiences at school to help them feel more comfortable at the beginning of the interview. Teachers were then asked to briefly describe their teaching experiences related to First Nations students. Parents were asked how they thought their children learned best. All interviews contained questions regarding the most important things First Nations children need to receive at school to support success in achieving academic goals and participation in extra-curricular activities. Parents and teachers were asked whether or not they felt the current education system meets the children’s needs. Finally, each person was asked if they would like to add anything or if there were any resources they thought would be helpful to support First Nations students.

Parent Experience with the School System

All three parents said their own school experiences were full of instances in which they had to endure name-calling, being picked on, “getting looks,” not being acknowledged, and being left out of activities they saw other children enjoying. One parent said, “Other students treated me differently because I was Native, and teachers were busy with other children and didn’t seem very concerned with what was going on with us.” Another parent grew up in a small town in Saskatchewan where hers was the only Native family. She remembered a single Asian family that was more accepted than her family was. “I guess my school years were very lonely, because I never got to enjoy the same things other kids did.”

The parents all reflected on their lack of self-confidence. One father said he “felt stupid” when he could not understand what the teachers were talking about when he attended parent-teacher interviews. “Our people feel so ashamed that they don’t have those same skills.” One parent felt she was talked down to when attending parent-teacher conferences, but found that conferences were more helpful than report cards.

One parent cited residential school experiences as a reason why parents play a minimal role in schools today. Relationships and parenting skills were lost when families were separated by distance and time. One parent whose mother attended a residential school described her relationship with her mother as “not being close” because her mother missed the training that a parent-child relationship often provides.

Racism was the strongest theme emanating from the parent interviews. The three parents felt that racism permeated their own and their children’s experience at our school. Parents believed others thought of them as the weakest culture. “First Nations families…are not good. I think it is hard to break that [perception].” One parent said her children seemed to seek each other out at school and played mainly with friends who were First Nations. A parent told her children “to stay away from kids that don’t treat them right,” when the children were called names. Parents felt racist attitudes emanated more from peers. I wondered if parents were willing to discuss racism only by their children’s peers because they were being interviewed by a teacher. I wondered if they would have mentioned racism stemming from curriculum or the school system if they had been interviewed by a First Nations person.

One parent suggested that the issue of racism needs to be addressed by staff and multi-cultural workers working with families at school. One parent thought that perhaps the First Nations community “plays its own part in it too, kind of a learned helplessness—this attitude—you’re not as good as everyone else, and
it’s not going to change.” Kehoe and Echols (1994) found that seven groups of various ethnic cultures consistently rated First Nations people low on a test that measured attitudes of how various cultures view each other. “The most negative evaluations were by Asian-Canadians,” (68). One parent felt the support available for First Nations people was not sufficient to make a difference in dispelling racism.

Support Parents Appreciated and Needed

Work sent home, such as flash cards, pictures, and books, was seen as helpful and parents appreciated being given these materials. “I tell my children they are very lucky. It’s a lot different than when I went to school. I think they know that.” Parents suggested that one-to-one assistance, step-by-step demonstrations, more time to learn when children do not get it the first time, and more explanations were necessary for their children to understand classroom lessons.

Parents said they want to help their children with homework but often found the homework confusing. The struggle of day-today living was felt to be a major factor which affected parents’ lack of time spent in the school or helping with schoolwork at home. They expressed appreciation for the positive ways in which teachers treat children, especially in helping children with difficulties fit in. Parents believed their children needed more support in all school programs. Parents sensed that their children need extra encouragement to attend programs after school and needed more instruction and time to understand and learn a sport activity.

Parent Goals for Their Children

Parents did not talk directly about what they wanted their children to learn academically, but throughout the interviews they suggested that they wanted their children to learn what the teachers were teaching. Kehoe and Echols (1994) stated that First Nations parents would like their own children to achieve as well as non-native students on standardized achievement tests. One parent in our study wanted her children to realize that high levels of education were available and attainable. All the parents wanted their children to have a sense of belonging within the school and they also wanted their children to participate in after-school activities.

Parents in our study were asked if they felt the teachers’ goals were the same as their own. One parent knew that the teachers had positive attitudes toward her children and thought teachers were concerned about the academic success of her children. One parent believed that her children were getting a good education and had decided not to move because other schools did not have what this school had to offer in terms of extra support for learning and after-school programs, including volunteer staff support. Parents felt that support given in primary years was crucial and would affect the children in later years where it was felt that intermediate children were so much harder to reach, even when receiving extra support.

Parents’ Views about their Cultures

Parents expressed regret about not knowing their own individual cultures and not being able to teach them to their own children. Parents felt that moving to Vancouver resulted in a loss of what little culture parents had learned as children. Vancouver was described as a “melting pot” of Aboriginal cultures which made it difficult to teach and learn about individual cultures. Parents appreciated the school’s attempts to teach Aboriginal cultures and the different events that have been held in the last two years developed to do this; however, one parent recalled a time when another parent did not want First Nations culture taught in her child’s class because it was different from her own. Parents valued the language, regalia, and stories that they had lost and felt their children would become more self-confident and proud if more of their culture was taught at school.

Teachers’ Classroom Experiences Related to this Study

Each of the five teachers interviewed had eight or more years experience working in inner-city schools. Over the years, they had worked with many First Nations students in their classrooms and fondly remembered the relationships they had developed with these students. Teachers were proud of the accomplishments of many of their Aboriginal students.

However, poverty, addiction, inadequate nutrition, neglect, lack of role models, and absenteeism were some issues mentioned by all five teachers when they reflected on their students’ experiences. Teachers attributed these harsh
conditions to the fact that they were teaching in an inner city school but added that the conditions “seemed to be compounded within First Nations families.” One teacher stated that “the difficulties often seem insurmountable because their home situation and their environment seems so complicated.” One teacher felt that residential schools had “devastated families because parents were not able to look to their own parents as role models on how to help their children in school or at home.” One teacher remembered a conversation with a grandmother who had such a difficult time in a residential school, she was unable to enter a school without feeling that it was not a good place to be.

Teachers’ Views on Best Practice/Support Needed to Help First Nations Children Learn

Teachers suggested that literacy was a key for students’ future success. One-to-one teacher support, less competitive situations in which to learn in, small-group work, repetition of work, humour, using various teaching styles, and allowing students more time to think before asking them for an answer were some of the solutions teachers offered to help their First Nations students, and others, learn more effectively. Hand-over-hand support, the use of manipulatives, role-playing, graphic organizers, and simple play time have benefits for all students, but teachers felt First Nations students benefited more through the use of these methods. One teacher encouraged students to believe in their abilities and their “power of choice” (i.e., to believe that their lives will reflect what they choose and therefore, that they should choose positive things for their life).

Two teachers said a structured timetable and consistency in classroom management help their First Nations students understand lessons and achieve success because they provided a clear framework for expectations. Teachers agreed strongly that they want to maintain the same expectations for every student; however, teachers would adjust their expectations so that students could achieve success. Two teachers felt parents thought their children were discriminated against when consequences (given to all students) were imposed for misdemeanors.

The teachers felt they needed more time with the First Nations Support Worker in class and working with students. This position could be crucial to bridge the gap between parents and the school. Three teachers felt that the government and Vancouver School Board (VSB) cuts make it difficult for First Nations students to be successful. Increased class size, decreased resources and teacher time for each student, and a reduction in resource staff support make it challenging for staff to attend to the individual needs of students.

One teacher deemed developing relationships and earning of the trust of all parents an important part of his job. He made himself available before and after school as well as at reporting times. He felt this was important with First Nations parents because “school is not associated with a happy time in their life. With parents on board...they see how important this is for their child....it makes a big difference.” A second teacher said her students trusted her more when they knew her expectations were attainable, “that they can do it.” She believed that building warm relationships with her students was a key factor in helping her students achieve success.

All teachers knew it was important for all students to enjoy coming to school, but believed that this factor was critical for success for First Nations students. Building up self-esteem was a focus in all five teachers’ classrooms, and all teachers mentioned working on self-esteem with First Nations students by having peer tutors, support from counseling staff, and after-school programs.

Teachers’ Thoughts Related to Culture

Teachers felt the school needed to do more to acknowledge First Nations cultures such as inviting First Nations celebrities, role models, artists, etc., to speak to the students. Battiste (1998) recommends not using “the ‘add-and-stir’ model of education” (47), but suggests integrating First Nations cultural materials throughout the curriculum. One teacher agreed stating, “It is the building up of pride in their culture. If you don’t use these or don’t mention or display any First Nation materials, they don’t see anything to be proud of.”

Two teachers felt staff needed to learn more about First Nations issues and concerns, as well as the best teaching styles to use, and even what parts of various First Nations cultures to teach. Teachers felt a significant need for more professional development that would help them assist parents to be more involved with home study, agendas, overcoming tardiness, and forming
partnerships with parents to help their children achieve more success in school.

Four Key Issues Identified from Interviews

Over the course of the interview process, four key issues emerged: Racism, Integrating First Nations Studies/Culture, Creating a Sense of Belonging, and Academic Success. Each of these is discussed in greater detail below.

Racism

Ing. (2000) quotes Friere’s definition of racism as, “the doctrine that some races are innately superior or inferior to others” (14). Parents felt racism deeply affected their own and their children’s experiences at school. The BC Human Rights Commission Report (2001) states that “there is the repeated reference students and parents make to racism and discrimination in schools. We must be honest about the issue of racism and work in partnership to eliminate it from individual, institutional and systemic practice” (6).

Integrating First Nations Studies/Culture

Parents discussed how it is important that their children learn about their culture, traditions, and history. Parents and teachers think a greater emphasis on integrating aspects of First Nations culture within the school would help First Nations students build identity and self-esteem, and would assist all students in the school to appreciate and understand First Nations cultures. The BC Human Rights Commission Report (2001) states it is “important for non-Aboriginal students to be made aware of a more inclusive representation of the history of this country to ensure that systemic ignorance is not perpetuated” (23).

Creating a Sense of Belonging

Parents who had struggled with a sense of lack of belonging when they were children felt that their children were still struggling with this issue. Teachers felt it was important for students to feel they belonged. Kehoe and Echols (1994) state that a sense of belonging affects achievement in schools, and correlates directly with better attendance and academic work.

Academic Success

Both parents and teachers identified extra support as a key factor in helping First Nations students to be successful. Parents discussed finding it difficult to help their children and the appreciation they felt for help they received with this from teachers. Teachers recognized their need for professional development related to best practices to ensure academic success with their First Nations students. The BC Human Rights Commission Report (2001) states, “Education is a fundamental human right of all people, but for the Aboriginal community it may be particularly critical as a step to overcoming historical disadvantages” (2).

Ideas, Suggestions, Programs

The BC Human Rights Commission Report (2001) suggests examining “individual, institutional and systemic practices that perpetuate racism and discrimination within the public school system” (6). They go on to say that “These structures are so much a part of the public school system that it is
difficult to step back and look at them objectively” (17). The HAWK theme (H-help ourselves and others, A-attitude and acceptance, W-we try our best, K-kindness and respect) we promote at our school should include a greater emphasis on racism, helping to teach children and staff how to recognize and deal with racism when it arises. These issues include: “What is racism?” “How can racism be harmful?” “What can you do about preventing racism?” and “What tools or skills do I need to overcome racism if I experience it?” Adopting such a focus will help us, as a school, learn how to recognize and change racist attitudes embedded within our school population and systemic practices.

First Nations parents described the lack of a sense of belonging at school for themselves and their children. Goulet (1998) suggests developing relationships “outside the formal relationships of teaching” (75), will be important when working with Aboriginal communities because parents may have had painful experiences in school. Relationships between parents and teachers need to be built as partnerships, not with teachers as authority figures. Teas, teaching parents how to support their children’s learning, and having elders come in to teach native culture are some of the strategies which two teachers in Goulet’s (1998) article used to develop relationships with parents. I have begun a “Cookie Crumb Reading Club,” at which parents and children enjoy coffee, juice, and cookies while reading together. I hope to connect with these families and affirm how much I value our partnership through activities such as these.

Concluding Thoughts

What can I do to be a teacher of social justice? Greene (1998) describes two aspects of teaching for social justice. “There is the importance of arousing the “sense of injustice” and of keeping it alive....the joy of working for transformation in the smallest places” (xiv). I have struggled with how to respond to the immensity of the historical and present-day issues facing First Nations people; as a non-native middle class privileged teacher who does not want to alienate parents by expecting them to embrace my views of success. This study has helped me, and I hope will help others, to understand the injustices suffered by First Nations people.

Through this process I learned how to do action research and because I worked in my own school, I could not detach myself from the issues I explored during the research or when the paper was completed. The research made me examine issues as well as my own perceptions and teaching practices, and helped me identify how to effect change in my own small place. I have worked with Kindergarten to Grade 3 children as an enrolling teacher and presently support children with special needs in their own classes. The little girl walking through the frozen snowdrifts was a First Nations child in my Kindergarten class during my first year of teaching 22 years ago. This study now feels like the small yellow dot on the huge frozen field: a little bit of knowledge in a vast land.

Resources


About the author:

Shanda Stirk has been teaching for over twenty years in various schools across three western provinces. In that time, she has been a classroom teacher as well as a resource teacher.