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Supporting Aboriginal Student Success: Self-Esteem and Identity, A Living Teachings  
Approach  
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Abstract

The connection between Aboriginal student success and self-esteem (identity) are explored and discussed in this article. The framework in which this paper is structured follows the seven good life teachings of the Ojibwe people. Each teaching has a companion principle which is the implication for educational practice. Each section is supported with research and offers strategies for student success. The question of ‘What works?’ is central to this discussion.

### Supporting Aboriginal Student Success: Self-Esteem and Identity, A Living Teachings Approach

A growing body of research demonstrates that Aboriginal students' self-esteem is a key factor in their school success (e.g., Hilberg & Tharp, 2002; Kanu, 2002; Swanson, 2003). An educational environment that honours the culture, language and worldview of the Aboriginal student is critical to this process. The curriculum and pedagogy of schools needs to meaningfully represent and include Aboriginal people's contributions, innovations and inventions. Aboriginal students require schools in all aspects to honour 'who they are' and 'where they have come from' (e.g., Antone, 2003; Gamlin, 2003; van der Wey, 2001). Aboriginal self-esteem is described as the balanced and positive interconnection between the physical, emotional/mental, intellectual and spiritual realms (see Figure 1.0 – An Aboriginal Model of Self-Esteem).

Figure 1.0 – An Aboriginal Model of Self-Esteem



Figure 1.0 - These four aspects represent 'self' and these are interconnected. Balance in all these areas is imperative to an individuals' sense of self.

#### Introduction

This article will explore the relationship between Aboriginal self-esteem and educational attainment, with particular emphasis on the practical meanings of these elements for the classroom. Some of the key questions that serve as a discussion sounding board are as follows:

1. What strategies currently work for Aboriginal students in schools? And, why is this so important to create meaningful change?
2. What are the day to day implications for educators? And, how can we ensure Aboriginal student needs are met?
3. What don't we know about Aboriginal student success? And, how can future research directions reflect those unknown variables?

The discovery and pursuit of potential answers will occur through pre-existing research that explores these queries. It will meaningfully proceed through a cultural framework

where the ‘living teachings’ of the Ojibwe People guide this paper (see Table 1.0 – Ojibwe Good Life Teachings and Implications for Education).

**Table 1.0 - Ojibwe Good Life Teachings and Implications for Education**

<b>Teaching</b>	<b>Implications for Education</b>
Respect	By having high expectations for the Aboriginal student through honouring their culture, language and worldview in our schools.
Love	By demonstrating our belief (as educators) that all Aboriginal students can and will succeed through our own commitment to their learning/teaching styles.
Bravery	By committing to change our school curriculum through including the contributions, innovations and inventions of Aboriginal people.
Wisdom	By sharing our best practices on Aboriginal Education with each other through on-going Professional Development and Research that focuses on imbuing equity.
Humility	By acknowledging that we have limited knowledge about the diversity of Aboriginal People and accessing Key First Nation Resources to enhance that state.
Honesty	By accepting that we have failed Aboriginal Students in the past and reviewing those factors to encourage change in the education system (increased parental/guardian involvement, schools, teacher education).
Truth	By evaluating the school success (with measurable outcomes) of Aboriginal students as a key indicator of ‘how’ inclusive our curriculum and pedagogy really is.

Note: The seven good life teachings are values/principles that are central to the Anishinabek (Ojibwe, Odawa, Pottawatomi) Peoples. The recommendations represent the implications for education that parallels each of these teachings.

Respect

*By having high expectations for the Aboriginal student through honouring their culture, language and worldview in our schools.*

This principle is central to the success of the Aboriginal student and has been reaffirmed through on-going research (e.g., Bell, 2004; Literacy and Numeracy Secretariat & Curriculum Services Canada, 2006). It is crucial that the Aboriginal student feel that they have a meaningful place in our schools. This can be achieved by ensuring that our own belief in the abilities of the Aboriginal student is great. Educators can either make or break the school experience of the Aboriginal student. This is why it is so important that the Aboriginal student see themselves (history, origins, culture) in the classroom. It is also key that these students know that their teachers care about them and have the highest regard for their learning. Respect (in Ojibwe terms) means to know that we are sacred and that we have a place in this world. This is ‘how’ we need to foster and support our Aboriginal students.

The implications for practice and ‘what’ this means for the classroom can be found in the following applications:

- Aboriginal cultures are celebrated throughout the school program.
- The library has a broad range of Aboriginal books and resources.
- Teachers are encouraged (and supported) to incorporate the diversity of Aboriginal peoples throughout the curriculum.
- The uniqueness of Aboriginal cultures are taught as a minimum baseline (500 Nations and their contributions) before the end of Grade 8.
- The Aboriginal territory on which the school is located is acknowledged at the door. This can be represented by having a welcoming in the Aboriginal language of that land.

These strategies are a beginning in showing respect for the Aboriginal peoples of the area. The Aboriginal student will feel that they are an integral part of the school. This ‘caring’ for their origins will be reinforced by the teacher’s belief that they can and will succeed.

### Love

*By demonstrating our belief (as educators) that all Aboriginal students can and will succeed through our own commitment to their learning/teaching styles.*

This principle requires action by fostering and supporting the Aboriginal student in their learning environment. It requires a change and commitment to the pedagogical transformation of the classroom. The learning styles of the Aboriginal student are unique and their school success is dependent upon educators teaching differently. Hilberg and Tharp (2002) have identified that Aboriginal students lean towards a) a holistic style of education (learning from whole to part), b) the use of a variety of visual organizers (multitude of hands on manipulatives – agenda maps), c) a reflective mode of learning (have adequate time to complete tasks & answer questions) and d) a preference for collaborative tasks (group and pair work in safe classroom environments that ‘honour who they are’). These unique aspects of the Aboriginal student and their preferences for learning need to be present in their day to day activities. This is ‘how’ Aboriginal student success can be achieved.

The implications for classroom practice are visually represented below (see Figure 2.0 – Appreciating the Learning Styles of the Aboriginal Student). This figure is the demonstration of the teaching of Love (in Ojibwe terms), which is perceived as those acts that we selflessly perform for others in our world.

### Figure 2.0 – Appreciating the Learning Styles of the Aboriginal Student

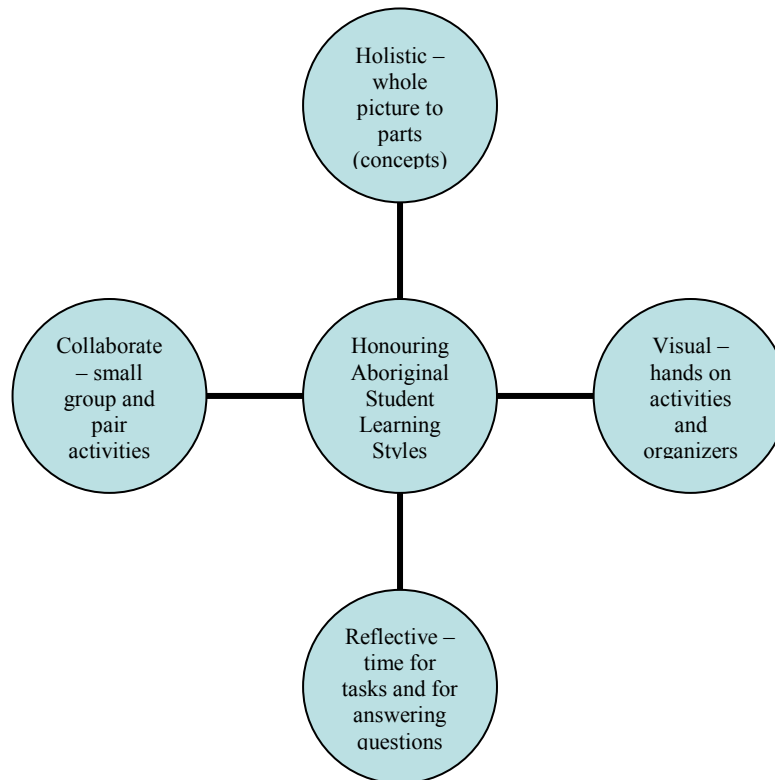


Figure 2.0 – These strategies are dependent upon a classroom environment that supports the culture, language and worldview of the Aboriginal student.

### Bravery

*By committing to change our school curriculum through including the contributions, innovations and inventions of Aboriginal people.*

This principle supports the Aboriginal student by providing opportunities to highlight and celebrate their Nations. The Shki-Mawtch-Taw-Win-En-Mook (Path to New Beginnings) Curriculum Project in Northern Ontario is a living example of this value in action. This curriculum is a series of meaningful First Nation units (with resources) that meet the Ministry of Education expectations (grade/subject specific). It is a beautiful collection of lessons and activities (K to 12) that honour the contributions of Aboriginal People to the World. The partners, Kenjgewin Teg Educational Institute, the Rainbow District School Board and the Ojibwe Cultural Foundation have launched this comprehensive curriculum project with great pride (see [www.thenewpath.ca](http://www.thenewpath.ca)). These units all begin with the Aboriginal expectations of the area (Anishinabek) and are continually guided by local Elders and cultural resource people. The worldview of Aboriginal people is crucial to the success and authenticity of this project. By incorporating this ‘form/type of an education’ into schools we facilitate and reinforce a positive identity for Aboriginal students.<sup>1</sup>

The implications for classroom practice and the strategies to implement this principle take on the following key points:

- Drawing on key curriculum resources that are Aboriginal specific (and still meet the Ministry expectations) and utilizing them in the school.
- Creating partnerships and establishing relationships with Aboriginal communities and schools to learn from each other.
- Highlighting the diversity of Aboriginal peoples and ensuring that their innovations are honoured (example: Daily Facts).
- Bringing in various Aboriginal resource people to share their teachings, knowledge and language.

These approaches are bravery (as defined in Ojibwe terms) in the sense that this value requires change. Bravery means to face ourselves and others (people, places, institutions) with integrity. The self-esteem and success of the Aboriginal learner depends upon our ability to do so (e.g., Goulet, 2001; Kirkness, 1998).

Wisdom

*By sharing our best practices on Aboriginal Education with each other through on-going Professional Development and Research that focuses on imbuing equity.*

The good life teaching of wisdom reminds us that we are life long learners. It also reminds us of the value of sharing and engaging in dialogue with ‘what we know’. This principle reflects that spirit of wisdom and the need for disseminating ‘what works’ for Aboriginal students. This can be achieved through on-going research and various professional development opportunities (many modes of instruction). Swanson (2003) provides us with many of those insights into key strategies that motivate/support Aboriginal students. Her research suggests these practical applications for the classroom:

- Celebrate their individual achievements and cultural background.
- Engage the student at a physical, emotional/mental, intellectual and spiritual level.
- Use a variety of teaching methods (with a particular emphasis on holism, visual organizers, kinesthetic opportunities and reflection).
- Create an environment where humour and ‘group talk’ is accepted.

These four points are great examples of suggestions that aid in Aboriginal student success. These examples come directly from Swanson’s work in an Aboriginal community in Northern Ontario.

Best practices are crucial to the well being of the Aboriginal learner. Sharing these practices in formal and informal settings is key to our own growth as educators. Teachers need to be supported in research activities to reflect on their practice. Practitioner research, with adequate training in various forms of critical ethnography, can bring us great insight into ‘what needs to be changed’ for the Aboriginal learner.<sup>2</sup> This type of research offers the teaching/learning community a different view of the issue/s at hand. The key components of this section are summarized and presented below (see

Table 2.0 – Strategies for Aboriginal Learner Student Success).

Table 2.0 – Strategies for Aboriginal Learner Student Success

<p><b>Wisdom is Sharing</b></p> <p><u>Celebrate Student: Achievements, Culture, Learning Styles</u></p>
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Class Environment: Holistic, Group Talk, Humour
Teacher Research: Critical Ethnography, Publish, Professional Development

Note: These strategies have been synthesized from this section called Wisdom. It is based upon the motivation research by Swanson (2003) and the learning styles research by Hilberg & Tharp (2002).

### Humility

*By acknowledging that we have limited knowledge about the diversity of Aboriginal People and accessing Key First Nation Resources to enhance that state.*

The Ojibwe teaching of humility reminds us of our fragility of self and the need to reach out to others for assistance. This is a key tenet in our educational goal of ensuring that the Aboriginal learner has success in school. As educators we need to go beyond our realms and ask the 'Aboriginal experts' key questions. It is so important that we go to Aboriginal organizations, institutions and members of the communities for direction. This can be achieved by following these suggested strategies:

- Work with Aboriginal organizations to collect/purchase curriculum and resources for the benefit of all peoples (create an inventory).
- Conduct an inventory of Aboriginal curriculum and resources within mainstream federal, provincial and territorial organizations.
- Organize this curriculum and resources (books, videos, DVD, kits, software, other resources) into grade specific categories.
- Disseminate this information to all school boards and the teacher federations in hard copy and electronic copy.
- Create policy that advocates for Aboriginal inclusion and equity in schools.

The key is to always include Aboriginal peoples as meaningful participants in any processes regarding Aboriginal children. The education of Aboriginal students and their futures support and build capacity for their Nations.

Aboriginal resources and the use of specifically Aboriginal books in the classroom are key to learner success (e.g. Doige, 1999). Literature that reflects the realities and culture of Aboriginal students supports their sense of self. It also challenges non-Aboriginal students to think about their peers in different ways. The resources in the classroom that are Aboriginal specific must also be analyzed to ensure their relevancy. Aboriginal resources should detract from the perpetuation of stereotypes and freezing Aboriginals in time. The literature that is selected and utilized needs to undergo a screening process that parallels these issues. Doige (1999) in her research of the impact of Aboriginal children's books on student teachers found that critical dialogue could be facilitated when this literature was introduced. Most non-Aboriginal student teachers in her course would leave with a greater understanding, sensitivity and genuine caring for Aboriginal peoples. The Aboriginal student teachers in the course were grateful that their cultures and worldview were being honoured. Now, think of the impact that Aboriginal books and resources would have in our schools? What kind of an impact would it have on the self-esteem of the Aboriginal learner? The answer is clear and obvious in terms of positivity and acceptance.

Honesty

*By accepting that we have failed Aboriginal Students in the past and reviewing those factors to encourage change in the education system (increased parental/guardian involvement, schools, teacher education).*

In the 2004 Report from the Office of the Auditor General of Canada we are presented with an alarming picture of Aboriginal education:

- There is a 28 year educational gap between First Nations (on-reserve) and Canadians (para. 2).
- Equitable access to quality education programs of their own choice is limited and restricted (para. 3).
- Educational achievement of Aboriginal students (and the gap between their Canadian counterparts) has not changed significantly since the 2000 Report from the same office (para. 10).
- The school age population (elementary/secondary) is growing and is estimated at 40% (as opposed to 25% with Canadians). A strategy to close the educational gap is imminent and needs to happen with accountability to Aboriginals (para. 32 & para. 33).

Albeit this report reflects the current situation with Aboriginals living on-reserve it is also highly suggestive of the off-reserve population as well. It is clearly a crisis and the success of the Aboriginal learner is dependent upon real change.

Honesty (in Ojibwe terms) means to ‘be and get real’ with the situation at hand. It means to proceed in a manner where responsibility and change go hand in hand. This is the point that we as educators have come to in regards to Aboriginal education. The learners from these diverse communities deserve and have the right to access, respect and inclusion. How do we proceed? Who needs to be included? Where does this change take place? What other factors need to be considered here? Aboriginal parents/guardians need to be valued. Schools need to reflect the culture, worldview and language of Aboriginals. Teacher education programs need to do more to prioritize Aboriginal inclusion (equity). These are definite areas for continued exploration and research. These are crucial areas that support the success of the Aboriginal learner in all facets.

Truth

*By evaluating the school success (with measurable outcomes) of Aboriginal students as a key indicator of ‘how’ inclusive our curriculum and pedagogy really is.*

Truth (in Ojibwe terms) means to examine (with clarity) the reality and lived experiences of a situation. It is the process of coming to terms with ‘how things really are’ and developing a plan to change, accept or modify an aspect of life. The success of the Aboriginal learner needs to be measured and this requires clear outcomes. The success of the Aboriginal learner is not so much a measure of their own learning, but, clearly an indicator of ‘how’ educators and their respective systems are committed to equity. This process can only happen when appropriate policy and the structural support



is put in place to do so. The Aboriginal Education Policy Framework (e.g. EDU, 2006) is a step in the right direction. It posits the Aboriginal learner and their needs front and centre (see Table 3.0 – Synthesis of Key Aspects of Aboriginal Education Policy Framework).

Table 3.0 – Synthesis of Key Aspects of Aboriginal Education Policy Framework)

<b>Principles</b>	<b>Key Words/Teachings/Values</b>
Excellence in Education and Accountability	Quality, achievement, support, resources, specific needs of Aboriginal learner...
Equity and Respect for Diversity	Creates, nurtures, positive, identity, belonging, endorses learning about Aboriginal student’s culture...
Inclusiveness, Collaboration and Shared Responsibility	Governments, institutions, families, communities, programs and services for Aboriginal learners...
Respect for Constitutional and Treaty Rights	Section 35 of Constitution Act, respects and protects the Aboriginal learner...

Note: The key words are taken from the Draft policy document and are intended to demonstrate the semantic (meanings) nature of the Framework Principles.

Conclusion

Self-esteem is the connection between the physical, emotional/mental, intellectual and spiritual realms. It is how an individual lives in balance (identity) with each of these aspects of self being cared for and attended to. The Aboriginal learner and their success is dependent upon educators and schools respecting this view. It requires change in ‘how we proceed’ and ‘teach’ our Aboriginal learners. It means that the pedagogy and content of curriculum in classes be inclusive of Aboriginal culture, language and worldview. This paper has been a journey that was guided by the seven good life teachings of the Ojibwe. Each teaching was accompanied by a principle that was the ‘implication for education’. Research supported these viewpoints and the key question (What works for Aboriginal learners?) was explored and discussed. Where do we go from here? What happens next? How do we ensure that the Aboriginal student is honoured? Why is this critical to our accountability to these learners? These are questions that will require further discussion (research) and action.

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Endnotes

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<sup>1</sup> This curriculum project has been piloted (and continues to be) in various schools within the Rainbow District School Board. Preliminary anecdotal comments from teachers, students and various parents suggest the valuing of Native knowledge and worldview instilling pride amongst Aboriginals and non-Aboriginals alike.

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<sup>2</sup> Critical ethnography is a research approach that has the researcher interrogate the system and institution in which s/he studies. This approach focuses questions on the structures from which the 'researched' operate. Critical ethnography problematizes structures/institutions (and their embedded epistemologies).