

# An Ethnographic Analysis of Aboriginal Alternative Programs

Presented to Dr. Charles Menzies

Anthropology 516

December 12, 2003

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### Introduction:

This past September of 2003, as local children and their families were readying themselves for another school year, an editorial came out in the Vancouver Sun which questioned the effectiveness of the current BC education system for First Nations youth. Pointing out that according to Statistics Canada, almost half of Aboriginal children do not graduate from high school, it reviewed inadequate government attempts to improve the system and advocated going to the grassroots for solutions to this pervasive problem. Educators who work with First Nations students should "identify what it is about the present system that either drives aboriginal students away or proves so lacklustre that it cannot engage its clients in competition with the seductive alternatives" (Vancouver Sun 29/9/2003).

In doing a study on First Nations alternative programs in Vancouver and Richmond, we wanted to understand why the public school system appears to fail First Nations students and does not facilitate their academic success. In keeping with the methods advocated in the above editorial, we sought to achieve this goal through an ethnographic approach, rather than focusing on quantitative or statistical information. The qualitative approach we have used involves description and synthesis of the individual experiences of a range of participants working in different areas of Aboriginal Alternative Programs in the Vancouver and Richmond school districts. Interspersed throughout the report, we have also chosen to include an insider's look at the Combined Studies Program offered at Matthew McNair Secondary in Richmond as a point of comparison with Vancouver district programs. Participants in our project were teachers, counselors, and managers, some working at the level of local programs and others with a more district wide influence. Our findings in this study are directly based on their perceptions of needs and recommendations for change in Aboriginal education programs.

We found that the failure of programs to meet local needs relates to issues of funding, assessment and feedback, a top down approach to program design, teacher training, curriculum, and lack of continuity between program goals and clientele. In writing up these insights, we acknowledge the hard work of those

with whom we spoke and their dedication to improving the experience of Aboriginal students in their educational and social life. We thank them for taking the time to participate in our study.

### **Outline - Report Structure:**

This report will cover the following topics: A.) Research focus and entering the field, B.) Research methods, C.) History and Structure of Aboriginal Education, D.) Key Issues Expressed by Participants (seven issues covered), and E. ) Recommendations for change.

### **Research Focus and Entering the Field:**

The initial focus of our group project was to examine the impact of upcoming budget cuts on Mini Schools on the West Side of Vancouver. To gain a better understanding of the details, Lindsay conducted background research on Mini Schools on the Vancouver School Board website, attended a Committee Three meeting held by the Vancouver School Board and attempted to establish a number of interview contacts with concerned parents. However, during the meeting, school board trustees announced that discussion on funding cuts to Mini Schools would be tabled until the New Year in order to conduct further research.

With our initial topic dissolved we switched our focus to Aboriginal Alternative Programs and how they responded to funding issues. We chose the new research topic based upon our personal interests, experiences and initial knowledge of First Nations culture. Several members of the group already had contacts in First Nations communities or with cultural or educational institutions dealing with Aboriginal issues. Lindsay had already experienced the First Nations 12 social studies class at Matthew McNair Secondary in Richmond; Meg had recently finished an internship at the Museum of Anthropology in the Education and Public Programs department, where she was involved in helping to prepare education kits for schools in the Lower Mainland; Tiffany worked for the Musqueam Band; Nazmul had connections with indigenous communities in Bangladesh such as the Chakma, and the Marma.

### **Research Methods:**

Our research endeavor is based on ethnographic fieldwork, which uses a range of ethnographic methods and techniques to accurately identify and classify the variety of events and actions that form a social situation (Fetterman 1998:31). Our methods included web-based research, library archival research, semi-structured interviews, email based interview questions, general observations, and an insider account

in order to ensure the integrity of our data. First, library archival research was used to locate three Ph.D. dissertations that discussed the history of aboriginal education in British Columbia. Web-based research was used to identify the structure of alternative programs, the areas of support given to aboriginal learners, and the various roles of aboriginal educators in the Vancouver and Richmond school districts. The web was also used to search for possible contacts for semi-structured interviews and to follow up on resources and printed materials mentioned in our interviews.

We used semi-structured interviews in order to identify key issues in aboriginal programs and to understand communities from "the insider's perspective". Along with web-based research, the snowball technique was used in some cases to select interviewees based on the recommendations of previous acquaintances. We interviewed seven participants ranging in occupation from administrators and researchers to teachers, district consultant support workers, school based support workers, and one previous student (Lindsay) in order to gain a better understanding of the central issues affecting Aboriginal education. Due to time constraints and lack of permission to interview minors, current students and parents were excluded from our study. Interviews took place at sites specified by participants. Consent forms were read aloud to participants and given to them to review. Before signing the consent forms, each participant was given the opportunity to clarify the details of their involvement. They were also made aware of their anonymity and control over information given in interviews. All interviews were recorded by technical device and on occasion, through note-taking. The interviews were transcribed and sent back to the appropriate participants, who had the freedom to make any necessary changes. Some participants were unable to return revised versions of interviews before the project deadline; in this case, their words were used and anonymity was respected.

Taking advantage of the fact that Lindsay had gone through First Nations 12 (an alternative social studies class offering aboriginal content), an "insider account" was made of her observations and experiences. This case study drew upon the above described methods, as well as an email based interview between Meg and Lindsay, which focused on her observations in class, her insights into teachers' training, qualities, and skills, and her experiences as a non-First Nations person learning about First Nations culture.

## An Insider's Look at First Nations 12

### **The Program:**

The First Nations 12 course at Matthew McNair Secondary in Richmond is only offered through their Combined Studies Program. This is an alternate program for students who have behavioural problems and is geared towards students who are either at high risk of dropping out of school, are re-entering the school system, or are unreceptive to teaching methods used in mainstream classes.

### **Methods:**

To gain a better understanding of the program itself, I enlisted the help of the Vice-Principal at the school who pioneered the program. I was subsequently directed to a dissertation written on the program as well as the program's grant application. Other materials used were the First Nations curriculum (both the K-10 curriculum and the Grade 12 curriculum) and a booklet showcasing the program's development and implementation.

Given the timeframe and schedule for this project our findings are necessarily partial and preliminary. In addition, the focus from which we make our inferences is narrow. However, we have drawn inspiration from anthropologist Eric Wolf's defense of the importance of "attending to what people report in their own words about the hopes and predicaments of their condition" (Wolf 2001:54). While we are aware of his subsequent warning that "what people say and what they do" can be two different things and a good anthropologist should be prepared to take note of both, it appears to us that as a start to a deeper understanding of a complex system, a lot can be learned from those most deeply involved in it. In addition, our methods fit with what Wolf calls "one of the virtues of the anthropological enterprise", namely "its long-standing proclivity to pay attention to what others left unheeded" (Wolf 2001:50).

### **History and Structure of Aboriginal Education in BC and Vancouver:**

Education programs for First Nations youth in British Columbia have a long and disturbing history, based on an official policy of assimilation into Euro-Canadian culture that began in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century with the inauguration of government funded residential schools and only ended with the closing of the last of these schools in 1986 (Bell 1998:1). The impact of the residential school experience runs deep and raw in First Nations communities. Children, who from ages five to sixteen, were forbidden for much of the year from speaking their native languages and engaging in traditional cultural activities, often found that upon return to their communities they could no longer relate to or even communicate with those they had left (Bell 1998:1). For many, the cultural shame that had been drummed into them did not go away upon graduation, but would continue as pervasive doubts about self-worth, passed on in turn to their children

(Bell 1998:1). Despite pronounced outward changes in the way First Nations children are educated in the province, several of those we spoke to referred to a continuing lack of trust in the school system in Aboriginal communities. They also intimated that the legacy of assimilation and marginalization continues unacknowledged in the present system.

Beginning in 1950, the federal government began to develop an alternative integration model to replace that of the residential school. Ending the law that made attendance at such schools compulsory, they set up band schools on reserves and began sending students to provincially controlled public schools (Morgan 1998:28). With these changes came increased calls by First Nations communities for control over the education of their children. This trend is exemplified in reports submitted to the federal government in 1972 and 1988, entitled respectively *Indian Control Over Indian Education* and *Tradition and Education: Towards a Vision of Our Future* (Morgan 1998:28-29). While the federal and provincial governments have acknowledged and made steps towards the goal of First Nations governed education, that goal has not yet been realized (Morgan 1998:28). At present, First Nations education in British Columbia falls into three categories: Department of Indian Affairs controlled federal schools, provincial public schools, and local First Nations operated schools. Our report focuses on the second category; that of the Vancouver and Richmond school district programs in the provincial public school system.

In the city of Vancouver, the Vancouver School Board (VSB) provides educational programs for six thousand elementary, secondary, and adult students, who attend one hundred and nine schools and six adult education centres. Within the VSB, district office and school based First Nations resource teachers and individual schools provide cultural enrichment and academic support and the Department of Aboriginal Education supervises programs for First Nations students. The department is guided in its work by the First Nations Advisory Committee, established in 1982, as well as by local aboriginal communities in the area (VSB website: "Aboriginal Education Programs and Services" 2003).

Aboriginal Education Programs are divided into three types: Cultural Enrichment programs, Aboriginal Support Services programs, and Other Approved Aboriginal programs. Cultural Enrichment programs, aimed at secondary level students, offer the core academic subjects as well as cultural components and life skills training. Many of these programs, which let students absorb material at their own pace, are designed for First Nations students who need more academic and social support than is offered

in the educational mainstream. Aboriginal Support Services programs provide First Nations students with personnel familiar with their needs and values, who can support them in all school programs. These personnel include tutors; elder, peer, or community counselors; home school coordinators, and area and school based First Nations Support Services workers. Finally, "Other Approved Aboriginal Programs", located in schools with high First Nations enrolments, are described in the VSB website as "intended to deal with exceptional situations and not intended to be a standard program for the majority of First Nations students (VSB website: "Aboriginal Education Programs and Services" 2003)". Included in this category are resource room teachers for particular programs and subjects such as First Nations Art and First Nations 12; *Kwatyetsut*, a week-long camp to develop leadership skills; graduation recognition ceremonies; career or cultural awareness workshops; and one District First Nations Youth and Family Transition Worker (VSB website: "Aboriginal Education Programs and Services" 2003).

### **Alternate Programs in the Richmond School District: Re-Entry, Station Stretch, and Combined Studies**

In the Richmond School District, there are three primary alternate programs that are designed for students with behavioral problems which have developed in response to students dropping out of school. These programs are Re-entry, Station Stretch, and Combined Studies. Developed for younger secondary students with behavioural problems, Re-entry has been in operation for almost nineteen years. Students in this program seldom return successfully to regular high school (Shore 1996:3). Operating for over twenty four years, Station Stretch is designed to provide students who have dropped out with the academic skills and knowledge base to return to secondary school.

Students often enroll in the Combined Studies program when both Re-entry and Station Stretch are full. Classified as "alternate" as opposed to "enriched", this last program is directed at students who have dropped out of school, and who either independently seek admission or are recommended by counsellors from McNair or other district schools. Students must be 16 years of age and go through an interview with the teachers of the program during which program requirements are outlined- mandatory attendance and completion of work.

Established in 1994 by two elementary teachers and implemented at Matthew McNair Secondary with encouragement from both the district and the principal of the school at that time, it has been described as "unique in that it welcomes a wide range of students described as "marginal" in their commitment and ability to function within the secondary system" (Shore 1996:63). Recently, Hugh Boyd, another Richmond secondary school, has implemented a satellite Combined Studies program.

### **Key Issues Expressed by Participants:**

To identify the major issues expressed in our interviews on the state of First Nations education in

Vancouver and in the Combined Studies/First Nations 12 program in Richmond, we grouped similar concepts and concerns into seven interconnected categorical issues: a top down approach to program design, mismatch between program needs and mandates, the need for better teacher training, a lack of mandatory First Nations cultural content in school curriculum, funding problems, maintaining accountability in assessment, and the need for response to grassroots feedback.

### **First Issue: A Top-Down Approach to Program Design:**

The school administrators we interviewed expressed frustration at the current approach to design and modification of First Nations alternative programs. The theme that repeatedly came up in conversation emphasized an approach to program design that while seeming to be collaborative, in reality excluded significant input by those the program affected most directly.

An example of this “top down approach” is seen an account about a proposition to create a high school for First Nations which was turned down by First Nations parents in East Vancouver. Although the idea was put forward by a First Nations education advisor of aboriginal heritage, she failed to develop it in consultation with local families, who rejected it as being too close to the residential school model. As phrased by one program staff who had been active in the process of developing the new program, “...They got - we call it the 'ivory eyes,' when you get too skilled and too educated and you think people are going to flock to you...I think they believed that whatever they said, the Native people would automatically say yeah, because it's better than nothing.”

### **Second Issue: Mismatch Between Program Needs and Mandates:**

One crucial legacy of the top down approach to program design and implementation is a wide gap between the stated goals of the First Nations alternative programs we looked at and the student, staff, and parents' experience of those programs at ground level. Although there are a number of factors feeding into this, a major cause is a phenomenon that has been crudely referred to as “programs as dumping grounds.” A program designed to educate “kids who are challenged a bit academically and culturally” and to feed them back into mainstream classes after several years has a hard time meeting its goals because substantial numbers of the students have severe behavioural problems, requiring a more intensive therapeutic approach to learning. Another program whose mandate is to work with “street entrenched youth” with behaviour problems finds that the large percentage of special needs teens it caters to cannot



absorb its compulsory secondary school level academic curriculum. A staff member in the former program expressed in frustration that “You have hardly anything that can be taught because the teacher’s dealing with these kids all the time.” In the latter program for street youth, the staff member said “To me special needs are a very different ball game - there are different supports, we should be implementing more life skills, more hands on training, and yet we do not have that. Where do these kids go?”

The result of such disconnects in these programs has been as follows: Students who fit the program mandate cannot learn to full capacity because untrained staff are having to deal with those students who do not fit the program mandate. Students who do not fit into programs in which they are placed do not learn and feel even more frustrated with themselves and those around them. In conversations with our respondents we were given as examples of the latter problem, stories of students who had been working on the same grade level for up to four years without progress. One of these students, a girl classified as “mildly intellectually disabled” who had not received any of the benefits to which she was entitled, was described as hating school, which had given her “a crappy experience”. Program staff wanting to encourage such students and to instill in them a sense of self- worth, were stymied in their efforts by the nature of the programs themselves.

Why is it the case that students with obvious needs are placed in programs that cannot meet those needs? A number of reasons were offered. Staff at both programs mentioned that there were not enough alternative programs available to meet the need. Predictably, school board staff whose job it is to place students, place the most challenged in the program where they think they might have the best shot for success, even if that program is inappropriate. Clearly more therapeutic programs need to be offered. In addition, it seems that the multiple challenges faced by some students - such as special needs and street involvement, require programs with flexible curricula and staff trained in a number of different areas. One staff member stated an intention to try and change their program’s mandate to reflect realities and then to request more suitably targeted funding. A third reason for ‘the disconnect’ between programs’ stated and actual clientele has to do with funding for special needs and for alternative programs, and will be taken up later in this paper. In the meantime, some students who cannot learn in their present circumstances feel relieved when teachers give up and stop expecting anything from them. As one respondent put it, “They think, “Wow, it’s great. I’m not pressured.” However, the problem is, are we giving them what they need?”

## First Nations 12 at Matthew McNair: Problems of Access

At Matthew McNair, the Richmond School District has set up the First Nations 12 course within the confines of the Combined Studies Program, which is an alternative program for students with behavioral issues. Even though the course is for credit and provides important information about First Nations histories and cultures, the set-up at Matthew McNair limits mainstream children from being able to take it as an elective course. Only Combined Studies students have access to the course. It should be noted that the only mainstream student who has taken this course had to seek admission from not only the teacher of the course, but the principle of the school. This is an administrative issue, not a pedagogical or curricular issue.

### Third Issue: The Need for Adequately Trained Teachers:

There are a number of qualified specialized staff working in aboriginal alternative programs, including administrators, district consultants, district learning services staff, area based First Nations school support workers, school based First Nations school support workers and youth and family workers. "At present," recounts a staff member, "there are twenty-five First Nations specialized support workers working in aboriginal education and seventeen regular enrolling First Nations teachers teaching in regular classrooms, bringing an aboriginal content to their classrooms."

Administrators hire and oversee support workers and aboriginal alternative programs in the Vancouver district, while district consultants and learning services staff provide support for aboriginal students and teachers in developing curriculum, literacy projects and professional development sessions with aboriginal cultural content for teachers at primary and secondary schools (VSB website: "Aboriginal Alternative Programming"2003).

Area based First Nations school support workers are stationed in groups of schools where aboriginal student populations are lower. They provide support for and promote the success of First Nations students by working closely with students, teachers, parents, counselors, administrators, school health professionals, district offices staff and other agencies connected to aboriginal programs in delivering academic and social support, cultural enrichment and parents/advocacy support (VSB website: "Aboriginal Education Programs and Services " 2003).

School and student support workers are assigned to schools that have a significant First Nations student population. According to one of our respondents, a ruling from the Human Rights Commission of BC requires that First Nations support worker positions be exclusively filled by First Nations. Support

workers are usually hired on the basis of education, expertise and experience. Most support workers have obtained a two year diploma centered on youth and family work, but increasingly, support workers are entering into aboriginal education with masters' degrees in counseling and crisis management. This specialized training allows them to provide aboriginal students with academic and social support, cultural enrichment, and parent support and advocacy (VSB website: "Aboriginal Education Programs and Services" 2003).

However, support workers, administrators and district staff are not the only part of the equation when it comes to teaching aboriginal students. While there are aboriginal program support workers based directly in schools who work closely with First Nations students on a day-to-day basis, the majority of support workers are area based and share the load of teaching aboriginal students with mainstream teachers (who are, for the majority, non-First Nations teachers). A district consultant stated:

We're not the ones to work with the kids day in and day out, we don't work directly with the kids every day, we don't teach them math, we don't teach them English, we don't teach them studies, we're a support system. We don't have a lot of influence over whether a student is passing or failing in their education, we aren't in charge of the educational program of the student, we aren't the ones to write the report cards...the crucial relationship is between the teacher and student and we're there to support them.

When we asked support workers to comment on the one thing they saw as an immediate and necessary improvement to aboriginal education, the majority of our participants expressed the need for qualified educators both in mainstream education and entering into positions as aboriginal alternative program educators. One of our participants stated that many non-First Nations' teachers and First Nations teachers enter teaching unprepared to deal with behavioural issues that face their aboriginal students and are unaware of how to appropriately follow local First Nations' cultural protocols. As one of our respondents put it, "problems in past programs can be seen based on a school's failure to respect First Nations protocol, to get permission from parents, students and community."

An example of problems with protocol was given in the form of a story, told to us by a support worker at a large secondary school, of an aboriginal program developed in the 1980's by the Vancouver

school board. Staffed by non Aboriginal teachers, by 1993/4, there was a growing concern among First Nations students and their parents about the anomaly of non-Native teachers teaching First Nations history and culture. First Nations students rebelled asking, "Why don't you have Native people here? You have all these non-Native people trying to do Native cultural stuff," Equally, their parents were upset about the teaching dynamics and expressed, "There are a lot of these non-Native people doing Native stuff, they shouldn't be doing that; they never asked permission!" According to this support worker, the "program came to an end when the school got frustrated and the staff got frustrated." It was suggested that part of this problem stemmed from the limited teaching positions held by First Nations teachers. "The lack of First Nations staff," recalled one of our respondents, "relates to the history of First Nations' experiences with education in BC, the difficult economic situation of First Nations in the province and the limited access to appropriate educational training for First Nations. Another respondent confirmed this idea, stating "At the time, Native people didn't have the skills to work in the school system they didn't have the post-secondary education. They weren't ready to come to work in the school system."

While part of the solution offered by the Ministry of Education in 1995 was to hire First Nations teachers, two First Nations support workers we interviewed expressed that it was not enough for teachers to be of First Nations heritage, they had to have an understanding of appropriate local cultural protocol and be adequately trained to deal with behavioural and cultural issues. Although it is generally assumed that by being Aboriginal teachers, they are automatically prepared to appropriately deal with the issues of cultural protocol between themselves, students, and parents, not all First Nations teachers come from the same groups and are not always aware of local cultural protocol. "They assume," as one respondent put it, "that because they're Native and they taught in a Native school in Prince Rupert and they've moved to Vancouver that they should be able to handle these kids." With some First Nations teachers, "it'll be their first assignment and they don't know what they're doing, they don't know how to work with the kids; they don't have that training."

It was suggested that part of teachers' lack of preparation may stem from the fact that currently it is not required that teachers-in-training for mainstream or aboriginal programs take courses on First Nations histories, cultures or languages towards receiving their education degree. As a result, non-First Nations teachers along with First Nations teachers teaching in the mainstream program are often unfamiliar with

First Nations alternative programs, history and culture and are inadequately prepared to deal with behavioural issues, special needs, issues of appropriate cultural protocol, culturally sensitive issues and current problems faced by youth when entering the district education system. One support staff worker commented that new teachers entering the education system and teaching First Nations students for the first time often "don't know what they are doing, they don't know how to work with these kids, and they don't have the training." "It is not enough," one support worker stated, "for a teacher to have a teaching degree but there needs to be a real interest and commitment on the part of the teacher to provide engaging ways for aboriginal students to learn and succeed."

Based on our interviews with support staff, we were able to identify key qualities teachers needed to adequately teach First Nations learners. In order to meet the needs of aboriginal learners and run programs effectively, it was suggested that teachers need to be extremely flexible with First Nations students and their learning styles, be sensitive to social conditions of aboriginal learners, understand and respect aboriginal cultural protocol, and create an atmosphere in the classroom of discipline and high expectations. As one of our participants stated, "There needs to be appropriate training, teachers need skill, and there has to be structured classes... there are teachers who try to be social workers, but there needs to be discipline in the classroom." There is an increased need for teachers working in mainstream education and teachers entering into aboriginal alternative programs to be familiar with the alternative program and recognize the unique sets of problems, issues and needs of First Nations learners.

### **An Insider's Look at First Nations 12: Student and Teacher Relationships**

Combined Studies was initially developed by elementary school teachers. With their specialized training as elementary school teachers, they adapted various techniques into a teaching philosophy that encouraged discipline and rigor. As a result, students in my class became so attached to the word 'rigor' because it came to embody so many things; the struggle of their education, their success in the program and a deep sense of responsibility. This teaching philosophy not only encouraged rigorous work from the students, but it recognized the life experiences and situations of each student. Teachers leading the program were seen as sources of support. While instability was apparent in many of the student's lives, the relationship between the student and teacher was one where the teacher was involved and aware of the activities of their students, and encouraged them to take responsibility for their actions (whether it be "trouble" or not completing an assignment). The teachers were prepared to lend extra support, such as staying after class to work on an assignment, in order for students to catch up. In Vancouver, it is apparent that troubled kids are mainstreamed into classes that do not adequately meet their specific needs; this teaching philosophy and protocol illustrates a way in which a program can deal with the individual issues of

youth while continuing to make their education meaningful and successful.

#### **Fourth Issue: Incorporating First Nations cultural content in classroom curriculum is not mandatory.**

According to one of our respondents, British Columbia's core curriculum was developed in the early 1990s. Core curriculum is a set of provincial learning outcome that every teacher has to teach and that can only be modified if a student faces learning difficulties or has a learning disability; as a district support worker dealing with professional development for students and teachers noted "there is no school that can deviate from the provincial curriculum." Before the curriculum reform in the early 1990s, the same district support worker remembers that "in 1989, when [they] came to the province and asked to have curriculum, nobody had any clue what the curriculum was, there were no curriculum documents, for instance, on social studies..." At the time when core curriculum was being built in BC, the inclusion of a First Nations perspective was limited to the point that aboriginal perspectives were not included in provincial learning outcomes. This support worker observed that "people in charge of curriculum at the Ministry of Education were not very open to including learning outcomes that addressed aboriginal knowledge...when it came time to address aboriginal issues, all their learning outcomes had been made." Learning outcomes in core curriculum introducing aboriginal people and their contribution to Canadian society are only offered sporadically in grades 4, 5, 9 and 11. The fixed quality of the curriculum has made it difficult to add aboriginal content and perspectives to standard curriculum.

During the 1990s, however, after findings of the Sullivan report on the failing state of aboriginal success in education in BC, a curriculum reform began. During this reform, standard learning outcomes were looked over and consultants made suggestions for activities and learning outcomes in curriculum areas where it would be logical and easy to apply an aboriginal perspective on First Nations people, culture, and history. Both First Nations 12 and "Shared Learnings" were created out of this reform.

Currently, there are a number of literature and curriculum consultants across the province that organize professional development learning activities for teachers and provide teachers and students with 'critical thinking' projects that attempt to interject an aboriginal perspective on class subjects. Based at the Vancouver School Board, consultants offer a "selection of areas for teachers to receive assistance and

develop areas of curriculum...demonstrating their commitment and leadership in the provision of staff development within the system (VSB website: "Professional and Staff Development" 2003)." However, the main issue surrounding additional perspectives and developments around existing curriculum is that they are not a required learning outcome; in other words, initiatives such as "Shared Learnings" or bringing an aboriginal content to core curriculum, are, as one respondent put it "just perspectives on learning outcomes, it is not a learning outcome." The same respondent adds, "'Shared Learnings' "isn't required by anyone, teachers are required to teach learning outcomes, but how they do it is up to them. They have professional autonomy to decide how they are going to teach something, they don't have to bring an aboriginal perspective to it."

In an interview with a support worker dealing with street entrenched First Nations youth, it was expressed that even the addition of First Nations cultural perspectives to core curriculum and academic subjects it was difficult to implement in the classroom "because of the youth themselves." The support worker discussed that challenges in teaching curriculum centered around the fact that most of the students attending the program were special needs with different learning styles, responded to life-skill activities over academic subjects and were, on some levels, ashamed of their cultural heritage, "not really [valuing] their cultural heritage."

In theory, part of what is seen as the solution to integrating aboriginal perspectives with curriculum and providing hands-on interactive activity options for First Nations students has been to use additional sources provided by consultants and apply them to existing curriculum. Noted in one interview, however, was that while excellent resources for teachers existed and are circulating, the difficulty remains in providing teachers who are interested in adding an aboriginal content to their teaching, with direct and easy access to quality resources written by First Nations. Without access to appropriate sources, teachers run the risk of implementing additional hands-on activities related to First Nations perspectives that seem 'culturally appropriate,' but in fact, go against local cultural protocol. One such example brought up in one of our interviews was the initiative of bringing First Nations elders into the classroom. "The elders idea," one support worker states:

...It's not a cultural idea...we didn't have an elders group sitting in another lodge, ten houses over, waiting to come in and help heal the community...there are some

elders who shouldn't be there [in classrooms] in the first place because they [don't] understand the culture thoroughly and [don't] go by the cultural protocol. They might be ...Ojibwa doing this in a school full of Salish people. You get a backlash from all the Salish parents...not every elder should be in the schools.

In short, it seems as though building cultural content is one thing, implementing it is another.

Though there have been attempts to create spaces in curriculum for aboriginal content, it becomes challenging to incorporate perspectives of all First Nations groups into several lessons. As a result, one of our respondents shared that "First Nations curriculum consultants develop additional First Nations curriculum out of their specific histories depending on where they are in the province." Despite additions of cultural content to core curriculum, incorporating aboriginal perspectives in the education system will continue to be sporadic and based solely on the individual interest of the teacher. One support worker stated that unless the provincial government made learning outcomes reflecting aboriginal culture to be mandatory, teachers would continue to focus primarily on core curriculum. Another respondent indicated that success in implementing curriculum (core or aboriginal) would only come when curriculum would be flexible enough to cater to the individual learning styles of First Nations students, and build on their strengths and interests, in order to create a sense of control and responsibility in the First Nations student. At present, there is no policy that requires teachers to include First Nations knowledge in their lessons. This means that there are no regular provincial-wide lessons that stress the diversity of aboriginal groups and the history of First Nations people from the perspectives of First Nations themselves.

### **An Insider's Look at First Nations 12: Curriculum Philosophy**

The First Nations 12 course is offered exclusively through the Combined Studies program at McNair and is co-taught by a First Nations teacher and support worker within the Richmond District. It is based on the idea that the "experiences of the students will, in fact, determine the way in which each individual will interpret the mandated curriculum (Shore 1996:36)." Here, Aoki speaks of the spaces in-between the mandated curriculum, the lived curricula, and the individuals: "The third space is the space in which newness is produced; it is the space where the lived curricula of the individuals meet and where the lived curricula and mandated curriculum meet (Shore 1996:36-37)." Understood in this way, the curriculum becomes that which is experienced by the teacher and student as they work together with the mandated curriculum. Teachers employed a philosophy of a "lived curriculum," adjusting the mandated curriculum to reflect the lived experiences of the students in the program, thus meeting their needs.

In regards to curriculum, in my mainstream high school classes, I observed that teachers felt as though they had to adhere to the mandated curriculum without straying from it. The course was co-taught



by a First Nations teacher and support worker within the Richmond District and teachers employed a philosophy around the idea of a "lived curriculum," where the mandated curriculum attempted to meet the lived experiences of students. Essentially, the mandated curriculum was expanded to meet the needs of the students in the program. Visits with elders, smudging ceremonies, making a deer skin drum provided the class with interactive activities.

Based on teachers' past training as elementary teachers and their previous experiences of success in implementing alternative teaching lessons, classes were taught as "narratives," to capture the students' attention and create an interest among students, to encourage students to engage with course material. This style of teaching curriculum was received by my class with enthusiasm as each student was given the opportunity to apply core curriculum concepts to their own knowledge in the creation of sets of "project pages" which created a course book at the end of the year. This book came to represent not only the knowledge that students actually learned but a testament to the rigorous work involved in complete the pages and a sense of accomplishment upon completing the book.

The Combined Studies Program was successful because it found a meaningful way to adapt core curriculum around the specific needs of its students--alternatives do work. Programs that provide success to aboriginal learners should be built upon; it seems as though this programs would be a good place to start!

#### **Fifth Issue: Funding:**

Issues of funding for First Nations are not as obviously problematic as administrative issues. As one administrator said, "The money's there. The money's always been there. They've never cut back. It's just never affected the students." However, looking beneath the surface one sees that although there may not be a lack of direct targeted funding for First Nations, funding problems still exist. Understanding the nature of these problems as well as the administrative problems is crucial for a clear picture of why First Nations alternative programs are not more successful.

While the Ministry of Education metes out a set amount of core funding for the education of each student, school districts in British Columbia have been receiving additional targeted funding for Aboriginal students since 1994. This latter funding of \$950 per student, directed towards Aboriginal language and culture programs, support services, and programs for improving attendance rates and performance in reading, writing, and mathematics, was initiated in response to the 1989 Sullivan Commission on education which found First Nations school attendance, academic achievement, and rate of high school graduation to be significantly lower than in the general population (Bell 2003:9; Summary Report 1999.) To obtain targeted funds, each school must send a yearly record of the number of enrolled First Nations students. Money for the total number of students is then given to the school.

One problem with this approach relates to the official division between the above described

targeted funding, designed to be spent on ensuring Aboriginal success in the basic curriculum (mathematics, literacy etc) and funding for First Nations alternative programs. The latter funding comes out of core (non targeted) funding, which must also cover items like instructional salaries and supplies, utilities, and transportation costs (VSB website: "Base Budget" 2002/3:12). However, core funding is in the process of being steadily cut back - in the 2002/03 school year it was reduced by 9.9 million dollars (VSB website: "Budget Reductions" 2002/3:1). A school board representative with whom we spoke said that districts were under pressure not to create alternative programs for First Nations, because of the lack of available funds.

In addition, due to the large number of special needs and inner city First Nations students in the Vancouver area, the ongoing government cuts in those areas disproportionately affect Aboriginals, with observable effects on education outcomes. For example, the Ministry for Children and Family Development has announced its intention to cut \$4.1 million from their support to Vancouver's Inner City schools over the next two years. The cuts will affect areas like provision of school meals and youth and family workers to inner city students whose parents often live on less than \$1300 a month (COPE website 10/04/2003). The Vancouver School Board has made an official statement that because many Inner City Aboriginal families are supported through a "differential service delivery model (shared responsibility requiring all education partners)", cuts to areas not "officially" targeted at First Nations students will nevertheless have strong impacts upon them (VSB website: "Aboriginal Education in Vancouver School Board" 2003). An example of this, as one respondent said, is cuts to youth and family workers which force First Nations support workers, already overworked with up to three hundred students per caseload, to step into the breach. Other "non Aboriginal government cuts" that seriously affect First Nations families and thus First Nations students, are the ongoing cuts to social assistance, and to special needs both within and outside of the school system.

### **Combined Studies: Funding**

The Combined Studies program, of which First Nations 12 is a part, is a 'district' program in the sense that it accepts referrals for students from throughout the district. It was also originally a district program in the sense that the district gave it \$7000 in start-up funds. Over the past few years, however, this has changed as the program no longer receives funding through the district and is instead run through the school itself. Currently, there are no responses to funding cuts, as due to the program being funded by the school, there are no pending cuts to affect it.

## **Sixth Issue: Assessing the Success and maintaining a degree of accountability in Aboriginal Alternative Programs:**

Throughout our interviews, we identified three ways by which the successes of Aboriginal Alternative programs are assessed. These include assessment by way of general district reviews and the establishment of school growth plans, government audits of a specific district and "How Are We Doing Reports." One way that the government keeps districts accountable is by a district review process. According to one of our respondents, this method of assessment pertains to all educational programs, "where a team of educators come into the district and review what the district is doing to improve education for learners in that district." Our participant continues on to state that assessment personnel "look at the data of each district, the kinds of professional development they are offering teachers and what their plans are for measuring growth (See appendix for Growth plan example on Templeton).

Auditing is another way that the government keeps districts accountable, but specifically applies when programs receive targeted funding from the government. In regards to aboriginal programs, a comment raised by one of our respondents states that auditing is one way that the government "makes sure funding is actually being used to support aboriginal learners...they check to make sure the funds are within the guidelines." "How are We Doing Reports," also concern the whole district, but more directly, they monitor the success of all First Nations learners in the province. "This is one way," states a program staff member, "that the Ministry of Education can monitor how aboriginal students are doing in the district and to make others in the educational community aware of how aboriginal students are doing." Aboriginal programs, with respect to these reports, are dealt with in a segregated fashion and as one respondent phrased it, "all of the fundamental skill assessments are disaggregated from the non-aboriginal population." In general terms, the "How are We doing Report 2002/2003" indicates that aboriginal learners graduate at lower rates compared to non-aboriginal learners and that aboriginal learners also have lower literacy levels than most non-aboriginal learners (see Assessment Appendix on How Are We doing Report). As a result of these findings, a participant reported that the Vancouver School Board has entered into a direct accountability contract with the Ministry of education to "improve the aboriginal rates of literacy and success of FSA results by 5% per year."

With the Vancouver School Board's accountability being quite public, their model of assessment is

changing. One participant indicated that instead of staying segregated from other institutions, now "policy is to pull community together," meaning, building partnerships with different facets of First Nations programs, communities and urban institutions. The participant attributed recent partnerships with the increased "climate of dwindling resources," and expressed that during such times, "you've got to figure out ways of providing at least the same level of support as what has been offered in the past." For example, as indicated on the Vancouver School Board's website, there are a number of new aboriginal programs listed that show partnerships with organizations outside the education. The 'Aboriginal Headstart' at Grandview, is an "integrated program involving the parent drop in centre, the Mother Goose Program as well as the infant and toddler day program. This particular program has "a partnership between Aboriginal Health (through Britannia Community Centre); MCF, City of Vancouver and VSB (VSB Website: "Aboriginal Education Programs and Services" 2003). The 'Stay in School, Stay on Track' initiative based out of Templeton was described by one of our respondents as being a program that partnered with the Ministry of Health, the National Crime Prevention Program, the Broadway Youth Resource Centre and UBC researchers, its focus being primarily on kids who have been diagnosed with fetal alcohol syndrome by Sunnyhill Hospital. The partnership network is designed to "provide an incremental support system for children that need extra help."

Though aboriginal programs are increasingly partnering with other organizations in ways that benefit aboriginal learners; "Each partner group," states one of our respondents, "has their own measure of accountability." The Vancouver School Board has partnered with a First Nations Advisory Council that meets monthly to look at what is working and not working for First Nations learners in the education system. As problems are identified, one support worker expressed the difficulty in maintaining an effective degree of accountability with the rotation of Vancouver School Board administrators every four years:

You've got an administrator who comes in every four years...so your management is changed in the school every four years. By the time we identify the problem and have done a bunch of lectures on it, and have told the staff, we get called into answer to what we've been doing and to help fix the problem, by then there's a new administration... and then they start reinventing the tipi.

In terms of following cultural protocol for assessing aboriginal students, the same respondent expressed

that "the administration is not doing the right amount of work with the right people." This contrasts slightly with a statement made by a member of the Vancouver School Board that expressed:

There is much more that needs to be done. There is no doubt about it; there are fewer resources for administrators and the whole system to be able to accomplish these kinds of goals we have set for ourselves. It is more difficult to do, but there is a strong commitment by the board and school principals that are really, really listening and going out of their way to engage parents.

It seems as though this de-centralized model of assessment poses problems in terms of accurately estimating whether or not programs are being affected. It is more difficult to identify the types of programs that are working to educate students because each program defines success in different ways. In order to create a more cohesive model of a culturally appropriate method of assessment, it is necessary to identify programs, such as homework clubs and tutoring blocks, which show successful results in the eyes of both administrators, support workers and students.

### **Combined Studies: Assessment of Success**

In terms of assessing success, the issue in this case is not of the success of Aboriginal students, but the students of the Combined Studies program itself. In this respect the issue of assessment is linked with how the VSB measures the success of First Nations students as both the school districts place a high weighting on literacy. For the Combined Studies program, however, the measure of success is directly correlated with the number of students who pass the grade 12 English Provincial Exam. As the program requires all students to write the provincial, in order to graduate, this becomes the sole measure of achievement. Combined Studies students may take more than one semester to complete the English 12 course but the pass rate for students in this program is 100% in both the English 12 and Communications 12 provincials (Shore 1996: 6).

### **Seventh Issue: Grassroots Feedback Falls 'On Deaf Ears':**

Ineffectiveness of current official assessment methods is compounded by the perceived powerlessness of families and staff at the grassroots level to effect change in programs that for one reason or another, do not mesh with the needs of their clientele. Ironically, the reason for this is not the lack of channels for feedback to the School Board, but the way that the feedback is dealt with. As one individual phrased it, "When we have an idea to tell them they go "Good good good. Put it in writing. We'll get back to you." I've been communicating with the school board for [a long time]. I've never gotten one memo back

that says anything to me but “Hey, really great. I think we’ll work with this.” ...It falls on deaf ears.” Another project staff member, who expressed uncertainty about how to communicate to their present supervisor, recounted how they had been quietly paid to leave a previous position as a support worker in a different school district, because it was felt that their advocacy on behalf of one of the students was disturbing the peace. The staff member’s hurt was evident: “...I was not disrespectful, I did not say “You...you....” or point fingers and blame... There were certain things that I was fighting for and they happened to be for youth, for the kids. Because I always thought, they are our future. ”

The general impression of the staff we spoke with was of the perpetuation in the present system of an authoritative pattern of dealing with the “Indian problem” that has been present since the earliest days of colonization. Although it was acknowledged that today aboriginal people are treated more as equals than was the case in the past, governments and school boards are still seen as exhibiting an air of cultural superiority and tendency to think about Native needs in terms of control rather than collaboration. One of our respondents was very clear about the continuity between past and present modes of interaction with First Nations.

There is a whole system that is not meeting the needs of our children and it has to do with our history, our history of being marginalized from the land, from the resources, the attacks on our aboriginal language and culture through the residential school systems, the reserve system...it’s creating this hierarchy and we’re going to be at the bottom of the hierarchy, whereas before we were independent and self sufficient people and now we are dependant...our school system is set up to reinforce the status quo.

A pervasive lack of understanding of complex and diverse First Nations protocols or rules of conduct feeds into the above problem. Although some students may have been cut off from their roots, on the whole, culturally distinct protocols should affect how parents and students are approached and how students’ problems and issues are understood. Lack of interest in this is interpreted as disinclination to understand First Nations on their own terms. One of our school board respondents pointed out that staff at individual schools need to work even harder to build relationships with First Nations families than with those from other backgrounds, due to a history of negative experiences many have had with the school system,

including the experience of residential school (Bell 2003:8). As he put it, "Many aboriginal families are still really reticent about coming to school." It was acknowledged that in certain schools, if not all, positive steps in this direction were being made by holding First Nations family nights (an innovation that was said by two other administrators to already be having positive effects in their community) and having Native parents on local advisory councils.

Much more change is needed, but as another respondent clarified, some of the disconnects between program plans and outcomes are due to the system itself. According to this description, staff within different departments of the school board pursue what they think they are supposed to be doing, even when the end result of all the busyness is less than positive. To suggest that they alter what they are doing is a tricky endeavor because they may feel unjustly accused and "not talk to you anymore." For this reason, a holistic, systematic, and well thought out approach to changing the system is what is necessary. A less sympathetic assessment of the situation was offered by another staff member, who framed the school board and related organizations' lack of response to constructive criticism as the cumulative effect of people tied to career positions within an existing system, who are scared that by critically looking at how it functions they will de-legitimize their jobs. In the current atmosphere of funding cuts to education with resultant teacher lay-offs, perhaps this fear is not entirely unwarranted (26/4/2003 Reid: C09).

### **Respondents' Recommendations for Constructive Change:**

In interviewing educational officers from different sectors of Aboriginal education, it was clear that there was no shortage of suggestions for changes that should be made to increase the success of aboriginal students in the Vancouver and Richmond school districts. Respondents' narratives about the issues surrounding Aboriginal education wove together stories, facts, and recommendations and as a result we found it necessary to include their ideas in this report.

With regards to the issue of teacher training, there were a number of proposals. One project participant articulated the need for compulsory courses on First Nations history and culture to be included in university education and teaching certificate programs. It was also recommended by a few participants that teachers working in Aboriginal education programs be required to take training to adequately prepare them for the range and intensity of behavioural issues and special needs they will have to contend with, as well as issues of protocol and sensitivity to cultural diversity. In addition to this, the opportunity to converse

with experienced teachers in these programs would raise awareness of the current problems faced by First Nations youth. The ability of teachers to maintain structure and clear expectations for class participation, while simultaneously connecting with students on an individual basis, was seen as key to effectively implementing prescribed learning outcomes. More flexible and relevant curricula which makes room for varied needs and learning styles would also help engage and motivate First Nations students.

In terms of curriculum, it was suggested that by building upon already existing programs and networks distributing cultural resources designed by First Nations for teachers to use, lessons in the classroom would have the potential to be more culturally appropriate and offer a broader range of topics. Teaching the culture, history and language of Aboriginal people as a required learning outcome could be an integral part of the educational experience of all learners in B.C., creating much needed cultural understanding between different groups and addressing the issues of racism that presently exist in the school system. Participants also recommended that existing programs that are identified as helping aboriginal learners should be given continued financial and other support. As one participant put it, "if we could do more of what we are doing it would make it much easier." Moreover, creating an effective distribution system where mainstream teachers can easily gain access to alternative learning sources may encourage them to add Aboriginal cultural content to their lesson plans. With a broader range of curriculum resources and an effective system of distribution, there is the potential to improve on curriculum diversity - to include social issues, urban issues, and to make classroom material more accessible, engaging, and reflective for both Native and non Native youth.

There is a need to create stable and viable solutions for problems that have already been identified in First Nations education programs. Expressed by one interviewee was the "need to work at more comprehensive strategies for insuring that there is more awareness for First Nations issues in this district...especially when there's new government to government to government relationships being established." It was suggested that part of developing 'more comprehensive strategies,' was to more consistently involve First Nations communities in the process of evaluating success and maintaining accountability. Along with creating an accountability structure based on First Nations community members' definitions of success, and not on numbers, test scores, and statistics, a need was also identified to build on currently existing formal and informal avenues of community involvement, such as First Nations family



nights, where parental concerns are heard and valued. In short, participants counseled that school boards explore a variety of culturally appropriate forms of assessment and feedback models at district and school levels.

Finally, more attention needs to be given to the dependence of First Nations (and other) students and their families, on multiple sources of support. First Nations education programs cannot possibly fill all educational needs by themselves, because education is not cut off from the rest of life. Learning is not simply dependent on curriculum and teachers, it is also dependent on basics like a healthy diet, a secure roof over one's head, and a wider system that provides financial and moral support for families and for those with special needs. With regards to government funding cuts to Vancouver School Board programs for inner city schools one participant had this to say,

I think that it's going to be a huge challenge, and we're all hopeful that some how, some way, funding will be restored. It supports a great deal of activity not just the school meal program, there's tons and tons of others...and I am thinking sort of optimistically here, in many of the inner city schools, the average family income is seventeen thousand dollars total and that is to support any number of kids so you can just imagine trying to support those kids in class.

With government cuts to School Board based anti-poverty programs complemented by reductions in other sources of support, some issues cannot be expected to improve without a reversal of the provincial government's current financial policies.

### **Conclusion:**

In conclusion, we found that an ethnographic approach (in tune with that recommended in the Vancouver Sun editorial) of going to the grassroots to learn what staff in Aboriginal education programs felt the issues were, was surprisingly effective. As a research team, we were able to assign members different responsibilities and thus interview a number of people in a relatively short period of time. Despite being inevitably as Wolf puts it, "captives of our sources", the stories that we were told raised common, easily identifiable issues and many recommendations gained strength by being made across the board (Wolf 2001:52). The study of the Combined Studies First Nations 12 program in Richmond provides a useful counterpoint to the situation in Vancouver. Like the programs observed in Vancouver it is not in danger

from direct funding cuts. The successes of the Combined Studies programme lies in its ability to inspire students with a unique "lived curriculum" that could serve as a model for programs that may be struggling with how to teach mandatory subjects in an exciting and meaningful way.

Aboriginal programs are unique educational programs, with unique sets of problems, issues and needs. As noted by several of our participants, these programs' challenges cannot be disconnected from the processes of history. The choice of previous governments to cut First Nations off from their traditional land based economies by imposing reservation systems and regulations around activities such as fishing, as well as the creation and enforcement of the residential school policy has created a legacy of poverty, trauma, and distrust. The urbanization of the Greater Vancouver area has stimulated rural to urban migration, bringing together many different First Nations groups into the same school catchment areas. This in turn contributes to the complexities faced by educators in Greater Vancouver Aboriginal programs around issues of protocol and the teaching of cultural content. To move beyond these issues is not easy, but First Nations, who understand the situation better than most, have taken the lead in demanding, designing, and teaching culturally sensitive, equitable public education programs for youth. The energy and devotion of those we had the privilege to speak to remain an inspiration.

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