

# Archived Information

## Roots and Wings:

### Teaching English in Schools with Aboriginal Students

*There are only two lasting bequests that we can leave to our children:  
one is roots; the other, wings. (Anonymous)*

#### Introduction

This article summarizes the general literature related to teaching English in schools with Aboriginal students and reports the results of an interview of this topic with a group of practising teachers in northern Saskatchewan, comparing their responses to the literature. Implications for teaching and suggestions for further research are provided. This article will be relevant to teachers, curriculum developers, administrators and policy-makers and to those who want to address challenges and issues in teaching Aboriginal students an academic curriculum delivered in English.

#### Review of the Literature

##### *Statistics*

As of January 2003, 1.3 million people Canadians claimed Aboriginal ancestry. This represents a 22% increase amongst Aboriginal people in 5 years (Foot, 2003) compared to a 3.4% increase in the non-Aboriginal population (CBC National News, January 22, 2003). However, the number of North American people of Aboriginal ancestry speaking their ancestral languages dropped by 29%, and only 3.5% now speak an Aboriginal language as their mother tongue (ibid.). Today, 50% of the Aboriginal population is under 25 years of age (ibid.) Aboriginal students make up 74% of the Saskatchewan's total English as a Second Language/English as a Second Dialect (ESL/ESD) student population, excluding band schools

(Sask. Education, 1997). These young people are our future and it is critical that they receive adequate academic education and language education in their first and additional languages, including English.

### ***The Distinctiveness of Aboriginal Students and Challenges to Their Education***

Aboriginal people have diverse social, cultural, and linguistic backgrounds (Goddard, 2002, Heit & Blair, 1993, Burnaby, 1982, Garret, 1996, Faries, 1991, Toohey, 1985). Most attend school in remote rural northern communities and on reserves and speak Aboriginal languages or an English dialect for most communications. Others attend school in urban and southern regions (Burnaby, 1982, 1987, Heir & Blair, 1993). For better or worse, the current provincial curriculum employs what is known as the Standard English (SE) dialect as the medium of instruction (MOI). This challenges Aboriginal students in schools because of little emphasis on addressing their English language needs (Burnaby, 1982, Faries, 1991, Hewitt, 2000).

This diversity presents compelling challenges for the teachers of Aboriginal students. Studies identify inappropriateness in policy and curriculum as well as the specific educational barriers facing Aboriginal students as issues in education. Suggested solutions are posed in the areas of appropriate language teaching approaches, effective pedagogy, policy and curriculum reform, and the essential inclusion of Aboriginal and post-colonialist perspectives in education decision-making at all levels. Several identify inadequate teacher awareness and training, too few Aboriginal teachers, little locally and culturally relevant curricula and resources, and low levels of funding as barriers to Aboriginal students' academic success (Beck, 2000, Burnaby, 1982, Frasier, 1995, Smith, 1999, Yurkovich, 2001). Research also focuses on the linguistic differences

between Aboriginal-English and SE dialects and negative attitudes towards dialects other than SE (Goodwin, 1998, Adger, 1997, Malcolm, 1999, Rickford, 1998).

Barriers facing Aboriginal students are embedded within the larger historical, social, and cultural context of education (Collier, 1995). Sociocultural issues in Aboriginal education, include history and issues of self-determination, school policy, Aboriginal control of education, socioeconomic conditions of Aboriginal students, maintenance of Aboriginal languages, and opportunities for students to express in their own languages (Barman, et al., 1987, Szasz, 1974, Garrett, 1996, Haig-Brown, 1995, Halfe, 2004, Beck, 2000, Smith, 1991). Poverty is cited as a major factor in the success of Aboriginal students, suggesting that "...unless the health, social, and economic conditions of Native lives are generally improved, the problems of language development and lower-than-average educational attainments levels will regrettably remain a part of the Native experience at schools" (Sullivan cited in BC Human Rights Commission, 2001, p. 49). In higher education some students identify "a need to overcome an abuse mentality, ...an inner struggle to eradicate a poor self image brought on by years of family violence, substance abuse and deep seeded negative stereotypes about Indian people as a whole" (Guerrero, 1999, p. 128).

Historical inequities in the education of Aboriginal people is now recognized as a major cause of Aboriginal language loss, and the challenges they face to maintain their cultural heritage and identity (Barman, et al., 1987, Szasz, 1974, Garrett, 1996, Haig-Brown, 1995, Collier, 1995, BC Human Rights Commission, 2001). School curricula and instruction are cited as Eurocentric (Battiste, et al 2002) and irrelevant to Aboriginal students' lives, needs, and learning styles (Burnaby, 1982). Post colonial discourse contends that the entire educational system has been and continues to be western-based and Eurocentric, perpetuating the notion of student deficiency,

and the marginalization of Aboriginal people including the validity and status of their knowledge, languages and cultures (Battiste et al, 2002). Yoeman (2000, p. 121) cites post colonial writers who argue against English as the MOI for Aboriginal students because of its colonialist nature and others who argue in favour of English as MOI so that it can be used to express Aboriginal reality to the world. Marie Battiste et al (2002) explore consciousness-raising and working together of Aboriginal and nonAboriginal people to address these challenges and develop appropriate educational solutions for the benefit of all.

Studies conclude that the school learning environment is unfriendly and exclusive, has inequities, views Aboriginal students as deficient, and does not recognize the rich cultural and language experiences they contribute (Barman, et al., 1987, Szasz, 1974, Garrett, 1996, Haig-Brown, 1995, Collier, 1995, Toohey, 1985). Individual affective factors such as low cultural identity, lack of confidence and self-esteem, and anxiety contribute to Aboriginal students' educational challenges (Collier, 1995, Frasier, 1995). They may see school as socially and culturally alien with little connection to their home lives (Frasier, 1995). They may also experience racism, and conflict or confusion with mainstream school culture (Smith, 1999, Taras, 1996, Haig-Brown, 1995, Guerrero, 1999, Hewitt, 2000).

The combination of so many factors may lead Aboriginal students to feel there is no reason for attending and continuing school and their achievement levels remain low (Szasz, 1974), and high attrition continues across Canada.

### ***The Case for Linguistic Diversity***

Arguments justifying the importance of linguistic diversity and its contribution to second language acquisition are convincing (Cummins, 2003, Reyhner, 1996, Skutnabb-Kangas, 2000). Education is essential for linguistic and cultural maintenance.

The destiny of a people is intricately bound to the way its children are educated. Education is the transmission of cultural DNA from one generation to the next. It shapes the language and pathways of thinking, the contours of character and values, the social skills and creative potential of the individual. It determines the productive skills of a people (Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples [RCAP] 1996, vol. 3, p. 433 cited in Battiste, 2000).

Language involves more than oral and written communication. It is also tied to values, culture, identity, history, literature, self-esteem and understanding of self, concept formation, and worldview. By employing SE as the only MOI in northern communities, schools do not meet the students' linguistic, educational and affective needs (Burnaby, 1982, Fairies, 1991). Once lost and replaced, languages and their associated cultures are difficult, if not impossible, to fully regain.

When bilingual students are instructed, explicitly or implicitly, to leave their language and culture at the schoolhouse door, they are also being told that everything they have learned from parents and grandparents up to this point in their lives has no value; the language through which they have expressed themselves up to this point in their lives has no value and must be replaced by a superior model. In such classrooms, human potential is being diminished. (Cummins, 2003, p. 5)

Emily Fairies (1991) points out that although Aboriginal language is taught as a school subject, it is not taught across the curriculum so Canadian Aboriginal languages do not thrive. Educators sensitized to post colonial discourse, aware of the implications of language loss and the power of English to marginalize other languages, and supportive of first language and dialect maintenance and growth for linguistic and cultural diversity, as well as for expression and use in teaching across the curriculum are much more able to address the goals and needs of their students.

### ***Teaching Processes***

Students who have difficulty understanding English, the current MOI in provincial schools, will have difficulties in their school subjects (Burnaby, 1982, Faries, 1991). Central to this is the impact of the language teaching process. Ignoring dialect differences, for instance, can affect the quality of education if dialect contributions and influences are not addressed and if dialect speakers are negatively stereotyped (Wolfram, et al., 1999). Teachers who have not discussed post the colonialist perspective and with respect to education in general, and language education specifically, may develop misconceptions and unjustified attitudes towards the value of Aboriginal languages and dialects in education. They may uncritically accept a foreign, non-Aboriginal curriculum (Goddard, 2002).

In regards to literacy development, the differences and unfamiliarity of written structures and conventions in SE appear to create additional challenges for students who speak Aboriginal languages or dialects, especially if they are from an oral tradition (Wolfram, et al., 1999, Bashman & Kwachka, 1989). Aboriginal parents maintain that schools fail to teach their children to read because instruction does not address factors of dialect (Christian, 1997) such as interference, pronunciation differences, spelling, grammar, and discourse patterns that are reflected in their writing (Toohey, 1985, Clarke, 1983). Consequently, teachers may focus on what they see as student deficiencies and error correction rather than on meaning (Clarke, 1983, Bashman & Kwachka, 1989, Blackburn & Stern, 2000).

Too few teachers know about their students' cultural and linguistic backgrounds or understand the challenges and political issues inherent in learning and using SE

(Fillmore, 2000). When a teacher underestimates a student's ability because of a linguistic difference, the student may fail in school, or be identified as developmentally delayed or deficient in some other way. Speaking a different language or dialect is also recognized as a rather than an asset so that these students are not identified and promoted into gifted programs (Fillmore, 2000, Flores et al., 1991, Christian, 1997).

Finally, lack of culturally, linguistically locally appropriate is a major obstacle in implementing effective language programs, and in using methods of teaching that are effective for Aboriginal students and their contexts (Fredeen, 1990). Barbara Burnaby (1982) adds that ESL material addressing immigrant students' needs is not culturally appropriate for Aboriginal students.

### ***Appropriate Education for Aboriginal Students***

Doug Hewitt (2000) points out that because many factors contribute to learning, blaming students for failures by putting them in remedial classes and having low academic expectations only prolongs educational inequality and labeling the students as deficient in some way. Also important is an appropriate school environment that promotes academic success by being a supportive, safe place for Aboriginal students to learn and have a sense of belonging (Haig-Brown, 1995).

There are a number of examples of projects addressing sociocultural barriers, adjustment processes and promoting sharing amongst non-Aboriginal and Aboriginal K-12. These include the Sacred Circle project (1983–1985) implemented first in the Edmonton Public School District and later in Ontario and Saskatchewan (Fredeen, 1990) and Australia's "Language and Communication Enhancement for Two-Way Education" (Malcolm, et al., 1995) and "Towards More User-Friendly Education for Speakers of

Aboriginal English” (Malcolm, et al., 1999). Marie Battiste (2002) lists a number of other programs and materials suitable for language development.

Also discussed in the literature is the importance of joint efforts amongst the school, home, and community (Faries, 1991, McGroarty, 1998, Smith, 1999). Aboriginal parents are interested in their children’s education (Smith, 1999) and, along with other caregivers and community agencies, have significant roles to play in helping Aboriginal students succeed by ensuring locally relevant curricula. McGroarty (1998) notes that school-parent-community partnerships, particularly when they involve first language (L1) and cultural understanding, can be transformative, often leading to positive reform in policy and curricula. Strategies include having Aboriginal parents and elders as regular participants in schools to maintain students’ cultural and linguistic knowledge, or working in classrooms as volunteer tutors and translators (Taras, 1996, McGroarty, 1998, Robb, 1995).

Aginhotri (1995) notes that worldwide, multilingualism is the norm, adding that children do not have difficulty learning several languages simultaneously. Gerda De Klerk (1995b) suggests that knowing more than one language is an asset because it develops cognitive flexibility, metalinguistic awareness, abstract, critical and creative thinking, and increasing communicative sensitivity with monolingual people. Faries (ibid.) contends that L1 development is essential to maintain Aboriginal cultures, languages, self-esteem and identity as well as to improve Aboriginal students’ academic achievement. Aboriginal language maintenance allows students to transmit Indigenous knowledge and culture more effectively. Aboriginal language can be promoted by including their use in the school,

community, and at home (Burnaby, 1982, Faries, 1991, Yoeman, 2002). Yoeman (2002) suggests eight practical strategies to support L1 maintenance .

According to Battiste, Bell and Findlay (2000)

...the most significant problem facing Indigenous people in the Decade of the World's Indigenous Peoples, 1995-2004 has been to restore Indigenous ecologies, consciousnesses, and languages after Eurocentric colonization and the destruction it authorized from its viral sources, and to understand how this history continues to imprison thought and constrain the conduct of the colonizer and the colonized alike. (p. 84)

These writers call for decolonizing education through “multilateral processes of understanding and unpacking the central assumptions of domination, patriarchy, racism, and ethnocentrism ... “ (Ibid.) While their writing focuses on post-secondary education, it is equally relevant for the K-12 sector. They note that “decolonizing requires the institutional and system-wide centering of the Indigenous renaissance and its empowering, intercultural diplomacy.” (Ibid). Goddard (2002) calls for critical discourse amongst school administrators and teachers to ensure appropriate policy, curriculum, methodology and materials. These ideas challenge each educator to become a change agent, by raising his or her consciousness and by becoming sensitized to the injustices of the past and the need for education that is more appropriate for Indigenous people.

### ***Pedagogical Approaches to English Language Teaching and First Language***

#### ***Maintenance***

The literature identifies the following approaches to support English development where English is the medium of instruction (MOI) students: bidialectism; additive bilingualism; adapted English instruction; communicative content/task-based teaching; and teaching using the students' first language or dialect as the MOI.

Borrowing from sociolinguistics, the bidialectical approach uses contrastive analysis to develop SE. L1 becomes a resource; the goal is to build on students' first language or dialect knowledge and show them explicitly the differences between their speech and the English required for academics (Adger, 1997, Corder, 1994, Goodwin, 1998, Rickford, 2001). This can lead to metalinguistic awareness, allowing effective use of both SE and dialects or first languages (Adger, 1997, Rickford, 1998, Goodwin, 1998). Toohey (1986) suggests the instruction must go beyond teaching discrete structural features to instruction on functional linguistic differences. Part of the bidialectical approach is giving students a clear message that maintaining their dialect or language is essential (Wolfram, et al., 1999).

Where the majority of the school population speaks an Aboriginal language or a dialect, bilingual programs usually take an additive approach to second language learning (Heit & Blair, 1993, Faries, 1991). Subject area instruction is almost entirely in the students' first language or dialect in early grades, while English is taught as an academic subject. Instruction gradually switches to English in later grades in some subjects (Faries, 1991, Goodwin, 1998).

Adapted English instruction adds modifications to the regular English language arts program to accommodate diversity and be culturally responsive. Adaptations occur in curriculum, content, instructional practices, evaluation and the learning environment (Smith, 1999). Characteristics of the approach include using Aboriginal teaching staff as role models, building on students' prior knowledge and experiences, making traditional Aboriginal rituals and cultural activities central, implementing appropriate traditional pedagogy, and using culturally appropriate materials. Holistic, student-centered methods such as whole language, language experience approach (LEA), and literature-based approaches to teaching have proven successful in schools in northern communities (Fredeen, 1990). Techniques such as sharing circles,

experiential learning and demonstration (Smith, 1999), and extensive reading and writing practice based on students' personal and cultural experiences (Taras, 1996) are primary in adapted instruction.

Communicative content/task-based language teaching is used to promote academic and communicative language development by involving students in real life tasks and meaningful projects (Leavitt, 1991). The focus shifts from traditional teaching methods to engaging activities using authentic subject-related materials. Students study in small groups with teacher support to develop critical thinking and learning strategies, and academic independence (Taras, 1996). Other strategies include: having high academic expectations of students; using scaffolding and modeling; encouraging student self assessment; allowing students choice in learning materials; and using cognitive coaching and tutorial support rather than intensive correction (Smith, 1999, Taras, 1996, Heit & Blair, 1993).

Writer Louise Halfe recently said, "Let them speak in their own voice. They'll learn English when the have to"(2004). Teaching an Aboriginal curriculum using the students' L1 as the MOI has been practiced successfully in some band schools. This approach is advocated to ensure cultural viability since culture and cultural knowledge is best expressed through the language(s) with which that culture is associated. In addition, using the students' L1 ensures the vitality of that language and the linguistic diversity that benefits all humanity (Daes 2000 quoted by Battiste 2004). Instruction of academic subjects in the students' L1 is an that must be created by Aboriginal people to serve their own interests (Battiste, 2004). It recognizes that a Western-based curriculum is not neutral and should not be viewed as more valid than locally developed curricula and knowledge (Goddard, 2002). This approach is empowering and will vary according to the goals and needs of each Aboriginal group and local contexts.

Approaches implemented with disempowered populations and in developing countries known as empowerment, critical, or transformative pedagogies aim to counteract the dominance of English and its power to subtly victimize peoples and their cultures. These approaches advocate techniques such as problematization, problem-posing, biliteracy, critical literacy, discovering one's voice, and discussing language maintenance as part of the struggle for justice and equality (Ada, 1988, Alexander, 1995, Auerbach, 1995, Brouse, 1996, Cummins, 1999, Freire, 1970, Pennycook, 1994, Wallerstein, 1982).

Other approaches include "adjunct support" (Roessingh, 1999), which introduces students to academic concepts in sheltered situations before or at the time they learn these concepts in regular courses. South African educators have suggested and in some provinces implemented clustering schools or twinning privileged with poor schools to maximize resource use and sharing. Teaching and learning centres have also been established to involve the community, and to support teachers, teacher trainers, curriculum developers and researchers working with language minority students (Heugh & Siegrühn, 1995). Tim Goddard (2002) has made efforts in northern Alberta and Saskatchewan to establish a directory of culturally and linguistically appropriate programming for the use of isolated schools.

Finally, incorporating traditional Indigenous pedagogy and local and global Indigenous knowledge is essential. Robert Leavitt (1991) contends that "the most significant differences between English and Indian, and Inuit languages are found in their ways of conceptualizing, preserving and transmitting knowledge" (p. 269). For Aboriginal people, traditional teaching is important in transmitting knowledge, understanding one's life experience, conveying information, developing identity, and maintaining cultural heritage and languages. This includes strategies that cultivate the Aboriginal oral tradition (Atleo, 2000) such as story telling and

story/talking/sharing circles (Garret, 1996, Hart, 1996, Orr, 2000, Sask. Education, 1999).

Teachers can engage students in activities that promote pride in Aboriginal heritage and traditions through involvement of elders, and organizing and participating in Aboriginal events (Orr, 2000, Haig-Brown, 1995). Some contend that Indigenous pedagogy tends to encourage cooperative and experiential teaching and learning, a child-centred environment, learning through modeling and observation, tutoring, artistic creation, a holistic approach to education, and including Aboriginal spirituality (Heit & Blair, 1993, Malcolm, et al, 1999, Orr, 2000). In fact, these strategies are also useful for many nonAboriginal students. Particularly relevant is linking academic content to students' prior knowledge and experience (Anderson, 1990, Taras, 1996, Blake & Sickle, 2001, Wolfram, et al., 1999, Malcolm, et al., 1999) and the use of culturally appropriate materials. De Klerk (1995) emphasizes that a "resource-based" approach in which teachers find, develop, or adapt culturally relevant materials must be accompanied by professional development for teachers.

Literacy development is singled out in the literature as being particularly relevant for Aboriginal ESL or ESD students identified as needing language support where English is the MOI. Teachers and researchers (Garret, 1996, Wolfram, et al, 1999, Malcolm, et al., 1999) find the Language Experience Approach (LEA) useful at beginning levels. The Whole Language Approach, is cited as a way to contextualize students' experiences by providing relevant and authentic materials and rich opportunities for students to learn language of importance to their lives (Wolfram, et al., 1999). Writing process activities also provide meaningful content for linguistically diverse Aboriginal students (Anderson, 1990, Edwards, 1980) and activates their prior knowledge and experience (Wolfram, et al., 1999). Wolfram, et al. also recommends the "consensus model" which incorporates reading strategies such as teacher modeling, use of

authentic texts, and scaffolding. Research supports the role of students' oral language, such as metaphorical use of language, to build literacy skills (Malcolm, 1999, Scott, 1993). The literature also suggests teachers specifically address speech-writing differences (Coleman, 1997, Wolfram, et al., 1999, Edwards, 1980). Linguistic variances from SE that are evident in writing should not be seen as errors, but be used to support the bidialectical approach (Anderson, 1990, Wolfram, et al., 1999) and help students learn to select SE forms when appropriate (Anderson, 1990). This, however, contradicts Halfe's (2004) advice to "let them speak in their own voice."

### ***Other Practices Supporting Language Education for Aboriginal Students***

A number of other practices are cited in the literature to support Aboriginal students' language development in their first and additional languages. First, educational administrators and teachers need appropriate professional training and support to address the challenges of students' with diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds (Fillmore, 2000). Many institutions have developed effective training to help teachers support their students in functioning biculturally and bilingually (Barman, 1987, Burnaby, 1982, Szasz, 1974, Malcolm, 1995). In addition, teachers need to feel adequate and empowered themselves in order to instill student confidence (Ada, 1991 in Heugh & Siegrühn, 1995). Since the majority of educators, both Aboriginal and nonAboriginal, are products of a Eurocentric curriculum, all should participate in post colonial discourse to heighten sensitivity to historical and prevailing inequities and facilitate appropriate approaches to policy, curriculum and pedagogical reform.

Appropriate teaching practices cannot be separated from ESL/ESD policy. Helen Robb (1995) contends "education will always be a political issue because it has the potential for empowering traditionally disempowered groups" (p. 18). Neville Alexander (1995) argues that policies must recognize that barriers of language are related to larger struggles for equality,

liberty and to socio-economic conditions. He advocates state-sponsored language awareness programs. Not all Canadian provinces have educational policies that take language needs into account. A reference committee of stakeholders including teachers is currently developing such a policy for Saskatchewan. Heugh and Siegrühn (1995) note the importance of teacher input at the school level where they say the impetus for policy change “is likely to come from teachers within the school simply because they are directly confronted by the education system’s inadequacy in catering for the needs of linguistically diverse students” (p. 91).

The school system often ignores Aboriginal contributions to society in the curriculum (Haig-Brown, 1995, Frasier, 1995). Celia Haig-Brown (1995), identifies a culturally relevant curriculum, as “a program which will maintain balance and relevancy between academic/skill subjects and Indian cultural subjects” (p. 150), and holds as central in the curriculum Aboriginal culture, heritage, languages, and contributions. This approach takes advantage of what both cultures have to offer and helps students move confidently between the two cultures (Leavitt, 1991). Teachers currently working with a Western-based curriculum can include Aboriginal content in theme-based units to ensure recognition and respect of the culture, knowledge and experiences that Aboriginal students bring to school. In addition, teachers can engage Aboriginal students in meaningful ways to learn the history and geography of their communities—for example, “through hikes and canoe trips, map study, readings, oral history, road-building, religious and legal history, archaeological, mythology, hunting and fishing activities, agriculture” (Leavitt, 1991, p. 274). Haig-Brown (1995) calls for joint funding efforts at the federal and provincial government levels to allow professional curriculum developers and Aboriginal people to collaborate on the development of culturally inclusive curricula.

## **A Case from Northern Saskatchewan**

The author met with middle school teachers in northern Saskatchewan. English is the MOI in these schools. The purpose was compare the literature with the challenges and needs voiced by practising teachers. By meeting with teachers, this literature review could begin to be validated.

The session was held in a northern school with nine teachers from three communities (populations approximately 1360, 1384 and 900) with significant numbers of Aboriginal people. Eight of the teachers averaged of 10 years each teaching experience. Seven had been raised in or northwest of Prince Albert, Saskatchewan, considered the gateway to the North. All but two had graduated from the University of Saskatchewan's NORTEP (Northern Teacher Education Program) or SUNTEP (Southern Urban Teacher Education Program). One teacher from out-of-province had completed a 5-year teaching degree with experience in rural and remote communities.

Directors of the two School Divisions identified the teachers and gave them time to attend the 2-hour session. Teachers were divided into two groups with two researchers on hand to take notes, ask for clarification, keep the discussion on track, or probe responses where necessary. The two groups came together at the end of the session to share their responses. The responses were written up and sent to teachers for verification.

### ***Summary of Teacher Comments and Comparison to the Literature***

The teachers reported that their students were mainly Metis and spoke English, Dene, Cree, Michif or a dialect of English. Street talk includes aspects of Aboriginal languages and is used with peers and siblings, but not with teachers. Most students learn English at school and at home, and if not from a traditional home they only understand isolated words and phrases of

Aboriginal languages. English proficiency of those from traditional homes may be limited. Some may not admit to understanding Aboriginal languages. Cree and Dene classes are offered in some schools, but many students are still unable to converse in these languages. This is confirmed in the literature. In more isolated communities and in northern band schools, Aboriginal languages are still spoken because there are fewer outside influences. Teachers stated that while English is crucial for academic success, L1 maintenance is also important, another point emphasized in the literature.

Teachers appreciated the straightforwardness and honesty of their students and the rewards of their work with them which included seeing students grasp concepts, enjoying learning, and student involvement in topics of interest to them, sharing what they've learned with parents, setting personal goals and maturing.

When asked about students' greatest linguistic challenges in academic English, teachers reported that students required vocabulary development, concept formation, grammar and word attack skills. Teachers sometimes found themselves translating terminology into easier language and reported that some students also needed pronunciation work. They noted that students were weak writers in SE. These weaknesses were attributed only partly to the fact that they may speak an Aboriginal language or dialect of English. Some of these same challenges are identified in the literature. Teachers also said that the Whole Language Approach imposed on teachers in past did not adequately address phonics and should therefore share the blame for students' difficulties. The literature advocates for the use of Whole Language. It could be that those teaching younger students need additional professional development opportunities in this approach that urge teachers to use phonics when necessary. While teachers reported that students' reading abilities were good, they said that students could not always identify with materials that are not culturally

relevant. Again, the need for culturally appropriate materials is cited in the literature. Other challenges identified by these teachers were as follows:

- working in multilevel classrooms; students vary in English language proficiency and academic ability; some students are older than their peers
- identifying student needs and cognitive challenges if the teacher does not speak students' language(s). Research suggests teachers learn at least one local language (Robb, 1995)
- difficulties implementing resource based learning because it is time-consuming and culturally appropriate resources are limited. The literature notes the need for appropriate professional development in this area (De Klerk, 1995).
- limited resources, such as too few computers in classrooms, few culturally appropriate resources, no assigned series of textbooks that allow for a progression of instruction particularly for transient students and new teachers
- a curriculum that is too broad with too little guidance in terms of a progression of learning from grade to grade
- budgetary constraints. Limited financial resources were also cited in the literature.

When asked what they do to address students' linguistic needs, teachers identified some appropriate books such as *Melanie Blue Lake's Dream*, *Daily Oral Language*, and series such as *Collections* and *Explode the Code*. Strategies used to address students' needs include: explicit vocabulary study; use of many examples, particularly those that make abstract concepts concrete; short activities and exercises that promote repetition and support academic study; letter and journal writing; research and presentations, especially those related to their lives and communities; reading and book reports. One teacher has students tape record what they have

written and listen to it to develop self-monitoring skills. That teacher also uses a computer program for adults that supports learning English. She notes that such programs need adaptation for use in K-12 settings. Where possible, teachers relate academic content to students' lives. The only similar strategies in the literature were the final one: relating activities related to students' lives.

Teachers felt well prepared through their teacher education programs. They noted that ESL methods courses were part of the curriculum. They appreciated the helpfulness of relevant internship experiences throughout their training. Their comments reflected the fact that the teacher educators in those programs understand the backgrounds of Aboriginal teachers and students. Respondents sympathized with those who did not have similar educational experiences. Respondents acknowledged that it is easier for teachers from the North to teach there, especially if they are familiar with local languages, dialects and cultures. Such teachers can identify with their students' struggles more easily, since they may have had similar experiences themselves when they were in school. The literature supports having Aboriginal teachers who know the languages and cultures of their students and can be role models (Faries, 1991). In spite of their expertise, they still call for appropriate teacher education and professional development for themselves.

The teachers called for provincial funding to support the following initiatives: better-equipped classrooms; series of textbooks; culturally appropriate materials available in libraries; culturally appropriate assessment tools; trained special education and ESD/language consultants; training of local teachers with knowledge of local languages as testers; professional development workshops in ESD and linguistics; orientations for new teachers; and opportunities to share with

colleagues in similar teaching contexts. Appropriate materials and increased funding were the main suggestions that also appeared in the literature reviewed for this study.

### *Discussion*

There was some similarity between the comments of northern teachers interviewed and the literature, but a number of differences. Teachers' comments regarding student diversity coincided with the literature. They accepted the need for English language development because it is the MOI in school. They did not state instruction should be in the students' first language(s), but they were not explicitly asked this question. Students' sociocultural contexts were not cited as being problematic, although teachers were not questioned specifically on this topic.

Because of student linguistic diversity in these communities, English is, in fact, the common language for their students. It would be a challenge to formalize use of the bidialectal approach, bilingualism or instruction in the students' first language or dialect because teachers do not necessarily speak local languages. However, those who do speak Aboriginal languages use aspects of these approaches. It would be more viable to implement adapted English language instruction or communicative content/task-based language instruction in these communities.

While the teachers seem cognizant of their students' needs and learning styles, this is likely because many are Aboriginal people from northern communities who have been through those same school systems. The literature calls for teachers to become familiar with learning styles and languages or dialects of their students when teaching to assure greater academic success. This has implications in southern and urban areas where teachers may not have linguistic and cultural knowledge yet find linguistically diverse students in their classrooms. Aboriginal teachers who know local languages or dialects were not concerned over negative

attitudes toward linguistic differences. However, they showed insight by suggesting the need for orientations to the North and teaching contexts for teachers coming from the South.

There are a sufficient number of Aboriginal students in these schools for the formation of supportive peer groups. It is probable that acceptance and self-esteem are greater challenges in urban schools where Aboriginal students and their languages, dialects and cultures are in the minority and where social problems are more marked.

The literature points out the dearth of culturally appropriate materials, a frustration echoed by these teachers. The literature particularly notes that Indigenous knowledge is rarely included in educational materials.

As reported in the literature, these teachers realized that students who speak Aboriginal languages or dialects need extra help in achieving the expectations of the provincial curriculum particularly in academic concept formation, English vocabulary development, and English written expression. The literature cites reading as difficult for students who speak an Aboriginal language or dialect of English, but these teachers did not note this as a problem. Nevertheless, teachers do recognize the need for a language consultant to advise them on how to best help linguistically diverse students and the need for testers with knowledge of local languages, dialects and cultures. They suggested that the testers should be drawn from existing knowledgeable northern teaching staff.

In spite of confidence in their teaching, the teachers still call for professional development events and such specialized assistance and professional development as suggested in the literature. They also noted that they wanted opportunities to get together with their colleagues to share challenges and solutions, an idea that emerged because this opportunity was provided during their discussion. None addressed post colonial perspectives or the notion that

they might be “purveyors of the status quo” (Goddard, 2002), although they were not asked to give their opinions on the appropriateness of the curriculum.

The literature cites the importance of community and parental involvement. While community involvement was not discussed by these teachers, they noted that parents did want to become involved, but do not know how. Some also ask students to do community-based assignments. It appears that the ideas in the literature may contribute to parental and community involvement in these schools.

These teachers as well as the literature cite inadequate funding as a barrier to implementing initiatives such as professional development for teachers and specialists, acquiring appropriate resources, developing curriculum reform and programs to include parents and the community in education.

## **Implications**

There are several implications to be derived from the literature and teacher input for government, administrators, and those teaching Aboriginal linguistically diverse Aboriginal students. First is the need for sound policy based on knowledge of the special challenges and barriers facing Aboriginal students and their teachers. Serious attention to post colonial perspectives is essential to policy reform for Aboriginal education. The policy should incorporate the input of local teachers, school administrators as well as students, their caregivers, and the community.

Second, is the need for a practicable curriculum that is appropriate for Aboriginal students. Such a curriculum must be based on reformed policy, needs assessment, input from Aboriginal people, best practices in language instruction for disempowered groups, and what is feasible in remote as well as urban schools. The input of teachers from a variety of teaching

contexts is also essential to curriculum reform for Aboriginal students. The curriculum must be supported by culturally and linguistically relevant materials that ensure Indigenous knowledge is primary. Language specialists sensitized to the power of English and well-versed in linguistics and cultural issues must be made available to support teachers in this area. Tests should be examined for culture and linguistic fairness and testers be familiar with local languages and cultures where testing occurs. Curricula should be living documents that are revised regularly to address teacher and student goals and needs.

Next is the need to support teachers with professional development opportunities to provide ongoing instruction in new methods such as bidialectism and process writing, and in tried but failed strategies such as the Whole Language Approach and resource-based teaching. Teachers need opportunities to learn about and share post colonial perspectives and to voice their frustrations and solutions at conferences and special regional meetings. Because teachers are the best people to suggest changes, the results of these meetings should be available to those developing curricula. Because of geographical distance, the suggestion of clustering or twinning schools and establishing teaching and learning centres may enhance the use of financial resources. Finally, involvement of the community, parents and other caregivers will involve ongoing organizational efforts as well as dedicated funding. The rewards of these efforts should lead to a caring and sharing community, which views the appropriate education of their children as an investment in the future of their languages and cultures.

### **Further Research**

There are a number of opportunities for further research related to the topic of teaching to linguistically diverse students of Aboriginal ancestry. Wherever possible, studies should be participatory and collaborative, involving Aboriginal stakeholders, particularly teachers of

Aboriginal students, the students themselves, parents and the community. In addition to ensuring the input of those most closely involved in linguistic instruction for Aboriginal students, is the value of conveying to those stakeholders that language is seen as an important issue in student success. There is a need to conduct studies of greater depth and breadth than the one reported in this paper. This would include research with teachers in other School Divisions within Saskatchewan and in other provinces using such research strategies as focus groups, in-depth surveys, action research, story dialogues (Labonte & Feather, 1996), and critical pragmatism or critical constructivism as described in Goddard (2002, p. 125). Linguistic analyses of Aboriginal languages as compared to academic English are needed (Theresa Dery, personal communication) to implement bidialectalism. In addition, action research to implement bidialectism, adapted English language instruction, adjunct support, empowerment education and other strategies should be measured with formative and summative evaluations to assess their effectiveness. Finally, other ideas suggested in the literature such as twinning and clustering of schools, involving community, setting up teaching and learning centres could be implemented and tested for their usefulness in supporting the education of linguistically diverse students.

## **Conclusions**

Research indicates that we cannot ignore the needs of linguistically diverse Aboriginal students and their teachers. The teachers interviewed confirm much of what the literature suggests and also extend those ideas. Further discussions with practising teachers will ensure that their voices are heard for the benefit of all. At the same time, teachers and administrators can benefit from studying suggested strategies from the literature.

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