Gender Issues in Aboriginal Learning

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Animation Theme Bundle 2:
Comprehending and Nourishing the Learning Spirit
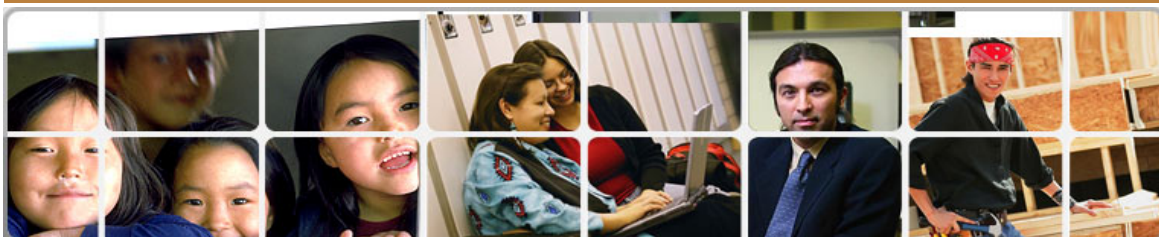
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The Aboriginal Learning Knowledge Centre (AbLKC) is one of five knowledge centres established in various learning domains by the Canadian Council on Learning (CCL). CCL is an independent, not-for-profit corporation funded through an agreement with Human Resources and Social Development Canada. Its mandate is to promote and support evidence-based decisions about learning throughout all stages of life, from early childhood through to the senior years. The AbLKC is co-led by the First Nations Adult and Higher Education Consortium (FNAHEC) and the Aboriginal Education Research Centre (AERC) College of Education, University of Saskatchewan. The AbLKC is guided in its work by a Consortium of over 100 organizations and institutions, a steering committee, and six Animation Theme Bundles (Bundles) led by members of the Consortium. The Bundles are:

1. *Learning from Place—Narcisse Blood, Red Crow Community College, Cardston, Alberta*
2. *Comprehending and Nourishing the Learning Spirit—Dr. Marie Battiste, College of Education, University of Saskatchewan, Saskatoon, Saskatchewan*
3. *Aboriginal Language and Learning—Dr. Leona Makokis, Blue Quills First Nations College, St. Paul, Alberta*
4. *Diverse Educational Systems and Learning—Saskatchewan Ministry of Education (Ted Amendt), Regina, Saskatchewan*
5. *Pedagogy of Professionals and Practitioners and Learning—Dr. James [Sa'ke'j] Youngblood Henderson, Native Law Centre, University of Saskatchewan, Saskatoon, Saskatchewan*
6. *Technology and Learning—Genesis Group, John and Deborah Simpson, Yellowknife, Northwest Territories*

From the start, the AbLKC recognized that the reporting and monitoring function of the Canadian Council on Learning required a dialogue with Aboriginal people to define successful learning from Aboriginal Peoples' perspectives. Together with CCL, the national Aboriginal organizations and interested individuals who have taken up this work in communities and institutions across the country were invited to share their philosophies and understandings of successful learning. The result was three holistic learning models with shared philosophical values and principles. It is the view of the AbLKC that the iterative models which can be found at www.ccl-cca.ca/aboriginallearning will serve as a framework for development of indicators to report and monitor successful learning, as a framework in planning for successful learning for individuals and communities, and in discerning what is, indeed, 'a promising practice'. We believe there are many other potential applications of these models.

In working toward addressing gaps in understanding what constitutes successful learning and what Aboriginal Peoples aspire to and need to succeed in their learning endeavours, AbLKC wishes to acknowledge that what is available as evidence of success in the existing literature is often unclear and undefined, and perhaps not representative of Aboriginal Peoples' perspectives. Responding to the aspirations and needs of Aboriginal learners means valuing their collective intellectual traditions and identities as Aboriginal peoples.

This publication *Gender Issues in Aboriginal Learning* is available electronically on CCL's Aboriginal Learning Knowledge Centre website at www.ccl-cca.ca/aboriginallearning .

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Introduction

The population of Aboriginal communities is one of the fastest growing demographic in Canada. While the population of registered status Indian population is decreasing due to government policies regarding membership, the growing youth population of Aboriginal peoples is said to being putting Canada's future in jeopardy since this population will soon be the population on whom Canada's economy will depend (National Council on Welfare, 2007). Yet, this population has been on the bottom of the education demographics with having the lowest graduation rates compared to the Canadian average and lowest employment rates (Statistics Canada, 2003). Hence the national need grows to address the learning issues, gaps, and challenges of Aboriginal peoples in Canada. However, in order to address the issues of Aboriginal learning, it is important to understand the Aboriginal learning context which impacts their indicators of success. In describing the First Nations context, Battiste (2005) stated,

> Colonization of First Nations has seriously affected their lives, and the people feel the oppressive nature of prejudice and racism in Canadian society. Very early colonists justified land seizure; removed First Nations from their homelands and put them on isolated and under resourced reserves; imposed residential and federal day schools and compulsory English colonial education; subjected them to overt, covert and systematic racism; imposed disempowering policies, practices and attitudes that have continued to the present, restricting their movement, livelihood, and survival. As a result, it is understandable but tragic that First Nations youth have the highest school departures before graduation, the highest suicide rates, highest incarceration rates, and perform far below the achievement and employment rates of average Canadians (p. 5).

Among the other reasons why the learning situation of the First Nations has not advanced significantly is that their style of teaching and learning is significantly different from the Euro-Canadian style. First Nations advocate a holistic, lifelong learning process that begins in the cradle and continues to old age (Battiste, 2005, Fontaine, 2007 & Friesen & Friesen, 2002). Some of the primary differences between traditional Aboriginal ways of teaching / learning and the Euro-Canadian style are: Firstly, Aboriginal communities respect individual differences within the bounds of cultural norms. Secondly, given the first precept,

young learners are not expected to progress in the same direction or at the same rate of speed as their peers rather they are seen as developing into their life journeys without interruption. As they grow, the talents they develop are expected additionally to benefit not only the themselves but also the community at large (Friesen & Friesen, 2002, p. 32).

In his emphasis on the status of First Nations learning, the National Chief of the Assembly of First Nations stated,

> Current indicators have failed to recognize the holistic nature of First Nations learning-based on intellectual, spiritual, emotional and physical being-across the lifespan, and we will continue to work with the Canadian Council on Learning to define a new approach. Lifelong learning is an important solution to eradicating poverty in our communities, and the development of a culturally appropriate framework for measuring learning will enable Canada to recognize the positive results that are occurring in First Nations schools (Fontaine, 2007).

The advocacy for holistic learning also calls for different learning indicators that are broadened to measure not only the years of schooling, attendance, or performance on standardized tests but a more holistic approach to measurement which will incorporate all aspects of lifelong learning needed to measure the individual and collective well-being of First Nations, Métis and Inuit communities (Royal Commission Report on Aboriginal Peoples, 1996, as cited in CCL Report, 2007, p. 1). Among the frontiers that need adjusting in the process are:

- Obtaining the services of culturally knowledgeable and culturally sensitive teachers;
- Incorporating language learning into school curricula;
- Acknowledging and teaching towards traditional Aboriginal learning styles;
- Developing locally-relevant curriculum materials; and
- Incorporating Indigenous knowledge into the curriculum, preferably by enhancing the role of the elders in the classroom (Friesen & Friesen, 2002, p. 28).

A culturally–relevant curriculum in the hands of a culturally knowledgeable and sensitive teacher might enhance the participation of pupils and parents in First Nations schools and develop positive relations with the community. The way Aboriginal people taught their young was very different from the contemporary schools.

While tremendous diversity exists among Aboriginal peoples of Canada, and no one style can be attributed to all First Nations, Inuit, and Métis, a summary of child rearing practices as evidenced in the prairies is reflected in the teachings of Elders Danny Musqua (Saulteaux/Cree) and Vicki Wilson (Métis/Cree) through the traditional Wellness Program Workshops held over several months in Prince Albert from February through May of 1995 (Vizina, Y., Vermette, K.L., Musqua, D. & Wilson, V., 1995). Their teachings reveal a philosophy of Creation of life that took a circular path from beginning to end, with Creator present from the beginning and beyond the end of life's journey. Children were part of the great circle of life, having their own learning path and distinctive knowledge, skills and purposes for being on the life journey. Cared for by a community of adults in multiple experiences, children are are given skills and knowledge in the circle of others who share their own knowledge and skills. Children watch and become prepared to do these things on their own in their own time and within the family unit. Among Aboriginal peoples, all things had their own time and pace and children were given great latitude for developing the skills and knowledge they needed throughout their early years. Storying was an important mode of sharing knowledge and experience, so listening to Elders was important. In these events, each person took something different from what they heard in the story, for each story did not have a singular purpose or moral to arrive at from one story. Ceremony, traditions, and celebration were frequent in full sense of themselves in a history of their people, their community and their family in order to live full and healthy lives (p. 10-11).

The learning process emphasized observation, modeling, and individual experience. Children imitated their parents enthusiastically and learned to grow into adult activities at a relatively young age in order to get the feel of the activities. The traditional style of learning rested on unique philosophical/spiritual grounds. "The Indigenous peoples saw the universe as a whole; everything was connected and all living things-people, animals, and plants-were perceived as *all my relations* (Friesen & Friesen, 2001, p.33)." Spirituality is the foundation for all learning among the First Nations people. The stance that public schools take concerning spirituality, that is that religion is an individual matter to be practiced outside of school or practice Christianity only in denominational schools, can have devastating consequences for the schooling experiences of pupils who grow in traditional spiritual First

Nations' ways. Rather than having a spirituality that is invested in all aspects of one's life, it is compartmentalized and deflected from one's daily life.

Gender and Learning

In order to make progress in redefining success in Aboriginal learning, there is also the need to acknowledge and address issues that hamper learning among both male and female First Nations. The Aboriginal Learning Knowledge Centre (ABLKC) through the support of the Canadian Council on Learning (CCL) is "committed to address information and knowledge gaps and provide evidence-based information to support all stages of learning, from early childhood through to the workplace and beyond" (Battiste, 2005, p. 2). Gender is one of the major cross cutting learning themes that is addressed by the CCL and ABLKC.

While gender has been mostly associated with women and girls, in Aboriginal societies, it is recognized that both First Nations men and women have diverse experiences and needs that need to be acknowledged in the learning environments. First Nations men need to be given the opportunity to mend the brokenness that they experienced through colonization and residential schools. Taken from their homes, boys and girls had their traditional roles, responsibilities, knowledges, and connections to adult members of their communities reshaped by white missionaries, nuns, and teachers. Both genders need to engage in a process of lifelong learning, which can enable individuals and collectives to survive the constant change in modern societies--whether it be political, economic, environmental, technological or social (International Labour Office Geneva, 2000, p. 7). The First Nations Holistic Lifelong Learning Model provides an orientation to how holistic learning can be conceptualized in that,

> Lifelong learning for First Nations peoples is grounded in experiences that embrace both indigenous and western knowledge traditions, as depicted in the tree's root system, "Sources and Domains of Knowledge." Just as the tree draws nourishment through its roots, the First Nations person learns from and through the natural world, language, traditions and ceremonies, and the world of people (self, family, ancestors, clan, community, nation and other nations). Any uneven root growth can de-stabilize the learning system. The root system also depicts the intertwining presence of indigenous and western knowledge, which forms the tree trunk's core, where

learning develops (Canadian Council on Learning, 2007, p. 2).

In order to ensure success in the learning of both First Nations men and women, consideration for learning needs to go beyond what is currently offered in both the contemporary learning environments and systems. In particular, learning within the context of Aboriginal life should acknowledge the importance of knowledge acquired by learning through experience. "Experiential learning, including learning from the land, Elders, traditions and ceremonies, community, parental and family supports, as well as the work place, is a widespread and vital—but often unrecognized—form of Aboriginal learning" (Canadian Council on Learning, 2007, p. 2).

When policy makers ignore gender issues, there is a crisis that emerges affecting both males and females. While both First Nations women and men are impacted by gender and learning, more literature has focused on the challenges that women have to resolve in order to succeed in education than for men. For this reason, the remaining sections of this paper will focus primarily on the gender women issues although it is clear that the interdependence of women and men in Aboriginal society is part of the philosophy inherent in culture and spirituality and wholeness and complementarity (Battiste, 1989).

Violence and Women

In addition to the challenges presented based on race and on their gender, First Nations women have had to provide care for children and their ageing parents, carrying out household chores and volunteering outside the family. The problems are more pronounced when women operate as single or lone-parent families. Hull (2004) reported that of the 945,230 lone-parent families headed by women in 1996, 31,620 were headed by Registered Indian women, while 16,505 were headed by other women with aboriginal identity. Registered Indians living off reserves in urban areas had the highest proportion of female single-parent families (29%). Those living off reserve in rural areas accounted for 12%, while 19% lived on reserve (p. 187). Hull also reported that a higher proportion of single-mother families lived in urban areas compared to rural areas. Single-mother families in most cases resulted from early pregnancy, divorce, and lack of official status.

Young women are usually at a disadvantage when they become mothers at a very young age. In most cases, they have to take on the duty to look after the baby on their own or with the assistance of parents if they are alive. Such situations imply that school is treated fairly with respect to the distribution of matrimonial property. Cornet and Lendor (2004) reported,

> With respect to matrimonial real property, the collective impacts of colonialism (e.g., the displacement or suppression of First Nations cultural values combined with gender bias) have resulted in many women finding themselves in a disadvantageous legal position when their marriage or common-law relationship breaks down. A comprehensive gender equality analysis must also recognize that First Nations women can be negatively affected, in regard to matrimonial real property issues, by the net effect of the Indian Act and decision making by Band Councils at the First Nations community level (p. 146).

In the case when a marriage has been dissolved and the woman has no relations to keep her and if she has not been allocated the matrimonial house at the reserve, she might opt to leave for the city. In such a new setting, most women and their children become more vulnerable due to lack of psychological, economical, and social support from their immediate families. In her study of urban women in British Columbia, Abbot (2004) found that women who left the reserve for the city experienced many unexpected changes and challenges that included loneliness due to isolation; missing cultural opportunities; denial of band-supported educational funding; financial concerns and worries; and cultural shock and added expenses for children's activities in the city. In such stressful situations, it would be difficult for women to advance their education. Since children generally remain with the mother, the implication is that more than one generation of children would be impacted by the negative living conditions. Abbott further reported that 29% participants in her study were affected by the situation, as were their 60 children (p. 177).

The focus of this paper is to identify the gender and learning issues among the Aboriginal people of Canada. The following will be addressed in this paper: writer's location and gendered research, colonialism and patriarchy, cultural/race relations, economic/political class, issues in gendered learning, and summary and conclusions.

Writer's Location and Gendered Research

This paper came at the end of my dissertation, which examined literature on gender issues in Malawi in particular, and gendered issues in other societies of the world. This paper came across through understanding similarities and differences between the gender experiences of Malawian women and Aboriginal women in Canada.

Throughout my schooling life in Malawi, I experienced gender inequities as a student in junior primary to secondary school and at post-secondary educational institutions. I also experienced these inequities as a teacher. As a primary school pupil, gender inequities were evident in the lack of choices in the non-core subjects that we were expected to learn. For instance, all the girls were required to learn sewing and cooking, while all the boys engaged in handcrafts. In addition, when I examined one of our former primary school readers a couple years ago I found that there were many stereotypes about boys and girls in the stories that were used. In secondary school, we had only one Malawian female role model on staff, who worked in the business office.

The only female secondary school teacher was an expatriate and the rest were Malawian male teachers. Most Malawian female teachers taught at the primary school. While some of the male teachers were encouraging and caring, some were abusive to girls, especially when they answered questions wrongly. These teachers did not tease boys in the same manner under similar situations.

The primary school where I first taught had three male teachers and seven female teachers. One male teacher served as head teacher, while the other two served as Standard Eight teachers. Female teachers were concentrated in the lower classes. At that school and at that time, female teachers were not appointed as head teachers, although some female teachers had higher qualifications.

One of the issues that I experienced in post secondary institutions was the unequal intake of male and female students. The teacher training college where I first trained to become a teacher had limited boarding facilities for female students, hence a smaller intake of women, compared to men. Later in my professional life, I learned that it was policy, although by this time, I had no knowledge of the discourses surrounding the language of

gender. I was more surprised when I went to the University of Malawi to upgrade. Our intake comprised 40 men and 12 women who were selected nationally for the programme. During the course of study, our male counterparts were not always kind to us. For instance, if a woman appeared on the Dean's list as having done well, some men grumbled and intimated that the female student had asked for favours from the professors. Nothing was said if a male student did well.

Kadzamira and Chibwana (2000), in *Gender-based Approach to Planning (GAPS),* observed that, in Malawi's primary schools, female teachers are concentrated in Malawi school system is examination oriented, teaching senior classes is also considered of higher status and therefore men are likely to build their teaching career in these areas (as cited in Croft, 2000, p. 15-16). In spite of the fact that senior classes may involve more academically advanced experiences for both teachers and students, my experience as a teacher demonstrated highly challenging conditions with these early elementary grades, particularly because of the large number of students in each class. In addition, since there is a unique challenge of teaching children the complexities of reading, writing, and numeracy in early grades, it seems unfair to underrate the lower grades or the teachers who teach them. The lower expectations for female teachers are to some extent based on the conceptualization that the ideal woman is powerless, subordinate, and dependent (Fox, 1999).

The problems of gender equity in Malawi can be summarized into three major categories: socio-cultural, socio-economic, and educational. These categories influence each other, while impacting on the people.

The socio-cultural context of women varies from society to society, within the different regions of the world. Socio-cultural practices are directly related to the cultures and the contexts found around the world. The impact of socio-cultural practices on gender are, first considered at the family level. In Malawi, as in most societies of the world, gender socialization begins the day that one is born. If the baby is a boy, the parents may start to refer to the boy as 'father' of the clan or the 'mediator' of the clan. A baby girl might be referred to as 'mother.' Gender socialization eventually enhances the position and disposition of the boy. When I was growing up, activities that socialized me while the boy built a house or toy cars. The dress code also socialized us, for example, girls were expected

to wear dresses and boys were expected to wear shorts. The gendered expectations that parents had for their children disadvantaged girls more because household chores, such as, cooking, house cleaning, pounding maize, going to the market were never ending and confined them to the house. Boys on the other hand would do occasional chores, such as chopping firewood and hoeing in the garden. The rest of the time they were free to connect with others and explore their surroundings.

In addition, within a typical Malawian family, "girls do not inherit family property and regardless of the matrilineal and patrilineal systems, males control both power and resources" (UNICEF-Malawi, n.d., p. vii). In the day-to-day life in Malawi, a girl is taught to be submissive, subordinate, and nurturing, and above all to serve others, because it is emphasized that girls should marry. If a girl wants to find a husband, she has to behave I certain manner. The importance of marriage is constantly emphasized, and by teasing and comments girls are chastised for not behaving in a way as to attract a husband. For example, if a girl does not do housework to the satisfaction of her mother or family, she is ridiculed with words such as "look at her, she will not find a husband" or "she will shame us, because she will not keep her marriage." Girls are not brought up to believe what they can achieve on their own, but always in relation to men.

The socio-economic constraints within Malawian families have affected the educational choices that parents make for their sons and daughters. Most Malawian rural households have periodical inconsistent food supplies throughout the agricultural year. Rural Malawians experience critical food shortages during the months of December, harvesting in April. Consequently, families might feel unable to send a girl to school because of the demand for girls' labour at home. Girls are usually expected to look after their siblings while parents go to look for food or work in the garden. Some parents value a boy's education more, and demonstrate their preference for a boy's education by providing food for the boy to go to school when there are food shortages while the girl stays at home and tends the household. The unequal allocation of resources and privileges by parents in favour of male children instills in the female children the belief that they are second best. Even if at a later time when girls have the privilege of continuing with their education, the seeds of

subordination have been planted. It might take committed mentors and teachers to assist such students to develop self-esteem and motivate them to achieve well in school.

There are many factors that impact upon women and girls' education. Apart from the home, institutions of learning have contributed to gender socializing. In an analysis of Chichewa literature texts, used at the Junior Secondary School level in Malawi, Banda (1998) found that female characters were portrayed negatively. The negative attributes portrayed women as not being trustworthy, not respecting confidentiality, having bandy legs, being bad cooks, and having unbearable body odor. In the same analysis, males were depicted as having power. The sources of power were their male characteristics such as assertiveness, their control over females, and their economic independence. Male characters dominated the female characters and were considered the heroes (p. 132). Most curricular texts in Malawi depict gender stereotyping as a reflection of societal norms. Women have been assigned a subordinate role. Through the different intervention groups are currently attempting to address gender inequities in curricular materials and the social lives of Malawians.

Colonialism and Patriarchy

The incorporation of colonial structures resulted in three crucial alterations that have had an impact on women's status in most colonized societies of the world. Waylen (1996) stated that, "colonialism brought important changes, profoundly altering political, social, and economic systems. These changes were gendered in crucial ways and men and women were affected very differently" (p. 55). Unlike the matrilineal pre-colonial structures, the colonial administration recognized men as having authority over women. Since the colonial officials believed in a patriarchal society where women had their place in the home, they began to apply similar economic and social principles among indigenous peoples in their colonies.

Pre-colonial era

Although some tribal groups in Malawi and other African countries were patriarchal during the pre-colonial times as well, male and female roles were said to be complementary.

Shillington (1995) reported that, "though there was division of labour between men and women, neither one had higher status than the other. They recognized their equal dependence upon each other" (p. 12). Women in pre-colonial Africa had autonomy, which originated from access to and control over economic resources. Women exercised influence over a variety of goods in different forms, although on unequal terms with men. Most women in this era were responsible for and preparation. "In addition to their roles in the agricultural sphere, women, particularly in West Africa, often played important roles in trade both of agricultural and other commodities such as cloth" (Robertson, 1976, as cited in Waylen, 1996, p. 51). Women were empowered socio-economically because they had access to commodities and were involved in trading.

Aboriginal Women Socialization: From Power to Disempowerment

The experiences of the Aboriginal women in Canada were similar in some respects to that of Malawian women in the pre-colonial era. Many Aboriginal women have difficulty in advocating the equality of men and women because "from an Aboriginal perspective, the woman's role in aboriginal culture was more than equal" (p. 1). For example, before colonization, the Iroquoian people lived in sedentary agricultural villages throughout southern Ontario. Women were defined as nourishers and men as protectors /helpers. Lineage in this society was traced from the female line. Although men were Sachems (leaders), women selected them and ensured that they were efficient. Women were keepers of the culture and they were responsible for the establishment of all the norms such as political, economic, social or spiritual (p. 1).

> In addition to the tasks of food production, preservation and preparation, and the domestic chores related to child care, hospitality and cloths making, Iroquoian women participated in many activities practiced primarily by men. They gambled; they belonged to medicine societies; they participated in ceremonies, most importantly those confirming political appointments. While Iroquoian society was far from being a female-dominated matriarchy, it is clear that Iroquoian women at the time of contact enjoyed respect and autonomy that had not been dreamed of by European women. (p.1)

Like their counterparts, the Iroquoian women's autonomy was disrupted to some extent during the colonial era.

Cultural /Race Relations

Colonialism impacted First Nations people in many ways, which included physical displacement from their localities to reserves, imposition of Eurocentric values on the societies, and disruption of their cultural foundations.

Colonial era.

Equality between men and women in First Nations societies changed with the arrival of European settlers who altered the lifestyle of Aboriginal women. Changes included judging Aboriginal women by European standards in which women were considered subservient to men and women as property of their husbands. The European biases affected the role of Aboriginal women in their communities, for example, the legislation, which decreed that Indian status could only be passed through the male line. Although the legislation to the *Indian Act* changed to allow Aboriginal women and children to reinstate their lost status in 1985, the male-dominated governing body on Indian reserves opposed the move. As a result, reinstated Indian women have experienced problems returning to their communities and these women face difficulties around housing, obtaining education assistance for their children and sharing in the community social services.

The European settlers' policies also impacted First Nations, Inuit and Métis men, although it seemed they were at an advantage in the colonization process. On the plains, the resulting sedentary life on reserves shattered men in particular because from birth, they were educated for the roles of hunter and warrior. Grant (1994) observed,

> First Nations women see the destruction of their culture as the major barrier to equality and a productive life. They see the destruction of their men by colonial powers as the most devastating of all factors. First Nations women will tell you that the concepts they have of themselves as mothers, as bearers of children, the keepers of the family unit, and the transmitters of culture, has remained comparatively intact. There is no such equivalent cultural identity for their men. While Aboriginal women may feel that they have suffered greatly at the hands of their men as well as men from outside their culture, they believe that Aboriginal men have suffered more. The

> woman who is battered suffers great mental and physical anguish. The man who batters is the man who has lost his soul. He has lashed out at what is the core and root of his culture, the respect for Mother Earth, and by extension, woman. (p. 57)

The adoption of European attitudes by Aboriginal men has resulted in the cultural and social degradation of aboriginal women.

> One in 10 women in Canada is abused by her partner, yet for Aboriginal women the figure is closer to one in three. Studies have shown that 80% of Aboriginal women have experienced family violence. The status of Aboriginal women in cities is disturbing. One study in Winnipeg concluded that 43% of Aboriginal families are headed by single women, compared to 10% of non-Aboriginal families. The employment rate for female status Indians aged 15 or more is estimated to be as low as 24%. (p. 3)

Apart from disrupting indigenous people's economic and social life, colonialism has also impacted other forms of societal socialization in the education and economic systems.

Economic class/Political Relations

During colonization, European values posed as policy. These values were based on a worldview that was different from the First Nations' worldview.

The Impact of Colonialism on Education

Treaties were negotiated for Indian lands in the west and in each of them First Nations negotiated for schools to assist them in making the transition to a new economy. Without qualified teachers, however, the federal government hired churches to provide the necessary school teachers for the school. Waylen (1996) suggested that, apart from the colonial authorities, missionaries contributed to the subordinate status of females. Before the British Colonial Development and Welfare Act was instituted in 1940, missionaries were the major providers of formal schooling. A mission education for girls emphasized future domestic roles of wives and mothers, while for men it emphasized skills necessary for employment. Employable skills were required for the clerical and agricultural jobs, which were required by European enterprises (pp. 61-62).

Aboriginal women experienced education as domestication of European values. Women were viewed as servers in their families looking after the children and managing the

home. The role was emphasized through subjects such as Domestic Science/Home economics. Because women have been confined to the domestic sphere, they have not benefited from the economic system. Barber (1992) commented,

> Women tend to place the needs of others ahead of their own and to hold loyalty to family and familial ideologies which privilege men in work place and family relationships. Another way of putting this is that workers everywhere bring specific class cultural values to work. (p. 80)

Today's Aboriginal women are working hard to acquire an education as well professional status because they desire to achieve economic independence and heightened parental responsibility. To a large extent Aboriginal women view education as a means for them and their daughters to escape socio-economic marginalization on the one hand, and risk or actuality of abuse at the hands of their partners on the other (Medicine, 1992 as cited in Stout & Kippling, 1998). In addition, advance education and training provides women an array of career options (Manitoba Status of Women, 2002).

Issues in Learning

The effect of colonialism has generated the cultural disruption of Aboriginal societies that this can be reflected in the learning experiences of all Aboriginal people in general and women and children in particular. The following section provides a summary of the key issues identified in the literature.

Lack of support

McGifford (Minister responsible for the Status of Women, 2002) acknowledged the challenges most women face in balancing work and family.

> Women face the daily challenges of balancing work and family. While women's participation in the work force has increased dramatically, along with the variety of work they perform, women's share of unpaid work hours-the care giving for children and ageing parents, the household duties, the volunteer work-has remained the same. (p. 2)

The above situation implies that women in single parent families lack the assistance in raising their families when they need time off to continue with their education. Aboriginal women who move to the cities face challenges such as lack of appropriate urban-based

services, such as quality, affordable childcare because demand still surpasses supply. Stout and Kippling (1998) reported that most Aboriginal women were concentrated in the youngest age cohorts than among Canadian women at large and that one third of the total (34.3%) were aged 14 years or younger. The young female population is the basis for larger families with almost 6% of Aboriginal women having seven or more children, as contrasted with 2.7% for non-Aboriginal Canadian women (p. 15). Aboriginal women who move to the cities face challenges such as lack of appropriate urban-based services.

Health

Another issue that disrupts the education of most women is poor health and nutrition. "Life expectancy at birth is a key indicator of a population's health status. In 2002 life expectancy reached highs for both women and men in Canada. Life expectancy for women is 82.1 years. Men, on average, can expect to live 77.2 years" (Status of Women Canada, 2005, p. 8). Life expectancy can be contextualized to place, although the difference between women and men can be explained through both biological and societal factors.

> For Aboriginal peoples, examination of life expectancy shows a very different experience. Although life expectancy has improved, it is still lower than the national average. Life expectancy at birth among the status Indian population, for example, has gone up for males from 59.2 years in 1975 to 68.9 years in 2000, and for females from 65.9 years to 76.3. (p. 9)

Researchers have noted that Aboriginal women living in the North and in many reserve communities are in a comparatively poor health status. Although gains have been made in life expectancy by all Aboriginal peoples within the last seven decades, Aboriginal women (and men) continue to die considerably younger than their non-Aboriginal counterparts. This scenario is a reflection of the structural inequalities still present throughout Canadian society.

Racism and Sexism

According to Status of Women Canada (2007), addressing gender-based discrimination against First Nations, Métis and Inuit should be done one after the other with addressing racism from non-Aboriginal Canadians and government institutions. Racial

hierarchy / 'othering' that was created through colonial policies continues today through latent or overt racism and sexism. As well, Aboriginal students might experience academic discourse that is intellectually distanced from their Aboriginal experiences and philosophies. Aboriginal women have pointed out that racial equality needs to come first before gender equality is addressed. Racial barriers are a real obstacle for Aboriginal women in the work place. Ramin and Demas (2002) stated, "The darker one's complexion and the more pronounced one's accent, the less likely one is of securing employment in the mainstream" (as cited in Manitoba Status of Women p. 1). Ramin and Demas further pointed out that Aboriginal women lacked support in the work place.

Lack of Choice in Professions

Although the numbers of educated Aboriginal women are increasing, there is still a substantial difference between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal women in formal education levels. A report on Aboriginal women by Saskatchewan Status of Women Office (2007) indicated,

> In 1996, six out of 10 non-Aboriginal women had completed Grade 12 compared with five out of 10 Métis women and four out of 10 First Nations women. The percentage of Aboriginal women who have completed post-secondary education is also lower-21% of First Nations women and 38% of non-Aboriginal women. In 1996, 1,615 Aboriginal women or 5% of the total had a University degree compared with 10% of non-Aboriginal women. (p. 3)

Further, Saskatchewan Status of Women Office (2007) indicated that Aboriginal women with a post-secondary certificate are inclined to specialize in different fields than non-Aboriginal women. These include professions within the social sciences (lawyers and social workers) and engineering and applied science, (trades and resource processing technologies). Aboriginal women also in most cases do not specialize in commerce, management, and business administration and less so in the health professions and technologies (Saskatchewan Status of Women Office, pp. 3-4). Although most Aboriginal women are employed in the public sector, an examination by occupation indicates that women in most cases are employed in low paying service jobs. Most women tend to be employed in the sales and service occupation category and in social science, education, and

government service category. Aboriginal women are also less likely to be working in health related occupations and in business, finance, and administration (p. 6). The limited choice of well-paying jobs has implications for the economic status of Aboriginal women, which impacts on their ability to access daily basic and educational needs.

Economic Struggles and Cycles of Oppression

Women and men are employed in gendered labour markets. Most women occupy positions that are sex-segregated, earn although most aspire full time employment**.** The situation is worse for Aboriginal women because the majority are situated within low-income employment, having their total income lower than that of non-Aboriginal women.

> Average personal income is much lower for Aboriginal women than for non-Aboriginal women. In 1995, the year prior to the Census, the average income for Aboriginal women (including the 9% with zero income) was $10,200 compared with $16, 3000 for non-Aboriginal women. To a large degree, the lower incomes among Aboriginal women seem to be a consequence of their marginal attachment to the labour force. Among those with a full-time, full year job, their employment income was ($22, 700, only 10% lower than for non-Aboriginal women. Total income on the other hand, is 37% below the level of non-Aboriginal women.(Saskatchewan Status of Women Office, p.7)

Although both Aboriginal men and women deal persistently with racism, men can find employment and advance faster than the women. Aboriginal women, women with disabilities, and women of colour face multiple challenges when seeking searching for employment. The economic struggles that most Aboriginal families experience because of race, gender or class inequalities perpetuate cycles of oppression, creating frustrations that emanate from people who are imprisoned by unhealthy life circumstances. The lack of equal economic opportunity might result in the prevalence of some higher than average rates of poverty, accidents, disease, injury, incarceration, and lone parent family structures, among segments of Aboriginal population. The prevalence of such circumstances creates a vicious cycle of reduced opportunities for education, Reduced opportunities for education are sometimes experienced by male students who enroll in integrated schools, whose philosophy is Eurocentric. Hingley (2000) pointed out what he witnessed as a Euro-Canadian student and later as a teacher who had all the privileges because of his gender and race. He recounts

the way First Nations students were discriminated in sports and other activities because of their race. Students at that time also suffered labeling because they were different. As a teacher, Hingley committed to making a difference in the lives of First Nations students that he had the privilege to teach. While there are individuals like Hingley who are committed to the deconstruction of colonialism, feminists as individuals and collectives also have and continue to make a difference in the lives of women, children, men, and communities.

Feminist Contributions Towards Decolonization

LaRoche (2007) defined feminism as a struggle to end sexism and gender-based inequality in society. Munanthoko (1992) pointed out that feminism is a term for the research, which examines gender relationships between men and women. "Feminists question and challenge the origins of oppressive gender relations and attempt to develop a variety of strategies that might change those relations for the better" (p. 71). LaRoche (2007) further intimates that Aboriginal women live under over-arching male-dominated conditions both as citizens and as Aboriginal people. Although their experiences are unique to their race, culture and economy, they can be addressed from a feminist perspective (p. 56). Political oppression of First Nations women has also resulted in their alienation from constitutional processes and from positions of leadership in White and Aboriginal male-dominated institutions. First Nations women have also faced discrimination and cultural life.

In addition to dealing with issues of justice and equality, feminists have critiqued male-dominated institutions, social values, and practices that are oppressive to women. All men and women whose agenda is to resist dehumanization and dispossession can be feminists because they are engaged in both deconstruction of old unfriendly structures and reconstruction of better ones.

Some critics have asserted that feminism takes single-issue positions, which are simplified at the expense of the majority. Grant (1994) stated,

> I have come to reject single-issue positions since they over-simplify at the expense of others. Such an approach is not within my vision of feminism, and though I understand the urgency of women's issues, I cannot work only for women's issues…. The bottom line is that in a racist society women are as much the enemy as men. (pp. 56-57)

St. Denis (2007) argued, "Despite the claims that some Aboriginal women have made about the elevated status Aboriginal women occupy in Aboriginal cultures, Aboriginal women do suffer marginalization and oppression within their own communities now and have done in the past" (p. 45). Green (2007) stated that Aboriginal feminism provides a philosophical and political way of conceptualizing, and resisting the oppressions that many Aboriginal people experience. Feminism is not the only way, but it is unique and anti-oppressive in its intellectual and political foundations. Feminism is critical, and has illuminated power abuses within Aboriginal communities, organizations, and families. "It enhances the ability of individuals to be political actors-to engage in the activities of children, men and communities" (Green, 2007, p. 30). While some First Nations women and men believe that the agenda for their societies is to rebuild and restore themselves and their cultures, feminists believe that it is their duty to confront patriarchal and sexist attitudes or oppressive behaviours. Through its partnership with the broad and deep stream of feminist activism, wherein theory fuses with strategic action and solidarities, there is hope that Aboriginal feminism will continue working to make the First Nations' and our world a better place.

Gaps in Research

Although researchers have identified issues in the education and lives of First Nations women, men, and children, there are gaps that need to be filled in order to present a clearer perspective. LaRoche (2007), for example acknowledges that sexual violence is one of the serious issues among First Nations communities and is also a global problem. Although sexual violence has been tackled to some extent, there is need to analyze and confront it at a much greater level (p. 61). Gaps also exist in the area of matrimonial real property in reserves. Abbot (2004) suggested that there should be more research carried out in the area of legal dimensions and implications of matrimonial real property in order to help support and motivate further policy discussion and development. In order for women who have experienced marital breakdown to heal, resources should be made available to alleviate the crises so that enable men, women, and children might be able to lead normal lives (pp. 179).

Another area of research in gender equality, whose gaps need to be filled, is the poverty and economic insecurity of women. Although many women are doing well, large this is especially related to family, caregiving, and minority status. "Female lone parents and Aboriginal women face particularly high risks of poverty and they face the greatest barriers to being able to balance the need to earn income and care for dependents" (Status of Women Canada, 2005, pp.10-11). The journey to gender equality will continue to require an analysis of the situation of men and women. Many factors have to be taken into account in the process. In addition, while researchers might conclude that single-parent families impact children's progress, it seems likely that further analysis of Aboriginal single-parent families might identify differences based on education, income-levels, cultural characteristics, how they are formed, and how long they remain single-parent families (Hull, 2004, p. 198). Such analysis might identify different issues that specific families experience thereby making it easier for people to find solutions.

Another issue that leaves a gap in Aboriginal research is the impact of childhood experiences on the criminal behaviour of Aboriginal young people. Although Trevethan and Moore (2004) find that Aboriginal offenders have unstable childhood experiences, including a great deal of involvement in the child welfare system, it is unclear whether involvement in child welfare is the cause of the instability or the result of it (p. 253). More research might enlighten policymakers, parents and educators on the best way to handle children to ensure more positive upbringing.

As we pursue the decolonization of First Nations Education there are questions that continue to plague Aboriginal communities that have assumed control over their schools. Questions concern how to implement Indian education in the twenty-first makers and stakeholders attempt to forge ahead in advancing First Nations education.

(1) What goals and outcomes are important?

(2) What processes must accompany cultural and linguistic development and inclusion?

(3) How do we represent our cultures in schools?

(4) What is appropriate, meaningful, and necessary?

(5) Should we teach and evaluate in traditional Aboriginal ways or adopt contemporary Eurocentric models of education to achieve a diversity of goals?

(6) How can Aboriginal communities be healed of past tragedies?

(7) How can cultural and linguistic integrity be achieved? (Battiste, 1995, p. xiv)

Summary and Conclusions

The colonial structures disrupted the worldviews of the First Nations people through force, terror, and educational policy. The result was a heritage of jagged world-views (Little Bear, 2000) where the First Nations people lost their own philosophies and were not able to fully own the Eurocentric ones. Because of the many collective worldviews that competed for the control of the behaviours of Aboriginal people, the result was that First Nations peoples have to make guesses and choices about everything. "Aboriginal consciousness has become a site of overlapping, contentious, fragmented, competing desires and values" (p. 84-85). The current situation of the First Nations people challenges political leaders, educators, and all society to decolonize former policies and practices in order to reclaim First Nations values.

Destruction/Reconstruction of Cultural Values

The journey to reconstruction might work better if individuals start by self-examination in terms of the values that we espouse. In order to ensure a positive postcolonial society, we need to decide that we will not be the oppressors of others based on race, class or gender. The creation of a postcolonial society in Canada might be accomplished through the deconstruction of value systems that choke the First Nations value of wholeness or totality that arises out of the Aboriginal philosophy of constant motion of flux. The concept of wholeness encompasses strength, sharing, honesty, and kindness. When these values are developed in an individual "then a person is whole and balanced, then he or she is in a position to fulfill his or her individual responsibilities to the whole" (p. 79).

Healing and Identity

The replacing of Aboriginal values with Eurocentric values during colonialism resulted in mistaken and imposed identities through the educational policies, such as residential schools. Healing in this situation can be accomplished through formal and informal education, which would validate individual personalities.

The education that leads to healing would recognize First Nations education as self-defining, respectful to the people's way of life, and would teach in a manner that enhances the learner's consciousness of being First Nations, while fully participating as a citizen of Canada or the United States (Hampton, 1995, p. 10). The value of wholeness as an aspect of First Nations worldview will also be evident as it displays the values of strength, sharing, honesty, and kindness. The function of First Nations' values and customs will be the maintenance of relationships that hold creation together (Little Bear, 2000, p. 79-80).

Acknowledgement of Gender Inequities

The decolonization process would also include the acknowledgement of gender inequities in First Nations communities through:

- Employing gender analysis in all program generations
- Increasing opportunities for males to succeed
- Investigating and equalizing opportunities for females to be employed
- Ensuring gender equity in employment, training, schooling, and professional development
- Consulting/engaging women in all decision making policy and program implementation (Battiste, 2005, p.11).

Funding for Women as Breadwinners not Individuals

As pointed out earlier, most First Nations women occupy the bottom rungs of the Canadian economic ladder. A majority of women as lone parents are responsible for raising their families and caring for their elderly parents, which makes it hard for them to engage in well paying jobs. As such they are not able to meet their basic needs of health care and education. In order to be at par with the rest of the population, policies on funding should be put in place to enable First Nations women to achieve their dreams. In addition, provincial laws should state laws recognizing the equal right of spouses on-reserves to the family

home, and basic remedies available off-reserve, such as interim exclusive possession of a family home. Such laws would cushion spouses who keep children after divorce or separation (Cornet & Lendor, 2004).

Education as Lifelong

Education as lifelong learning needs more opportunities and choices. Education as a lifelong process should be structured in such a way that at each level of the life cycle, individuals should have more access and choices in the education that matches their needs and life circumstances. Such a scenario would require the establishment of both informal and formal structures of learning to cater to the needs well, are the youth, because they are the future of Canada.

Child Care /Elder Care

In order for First Nations women to advance in their education, there is need for support structures to be put in place that would alleviate their responsibilities for the care of children and parents. The establishment of more childcare and elder care facilities would enable women to balance their engagement in education and with their families. With a little more time at their hands, women would be more influential in the raising of their young children, who would in turn contribute to more balanced and healthy communities.

The achievement of a balanced Canadian First Nations Education requires commitment on the part of teachers, chiefs, parents, policymakers, and all other stakeholders. Apart from human resources, financial resources should be made available to facilitate the lifelong education of the First Nations peoples. In addition, intervention programs should be made available to address the issues of high school departures of First Nations youth before graduation and the high incarceration rates. As well, there would be a need to address the high rates of infant mortality and family social problems. The intervention programs might be carried out within the big umbrella of reclaiming First Nations values.

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