In School but not of the School: Teaching Aboriginal Students, Inferiorizing Subjectivities, and Schooling Exclusions

by

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Abstract

Education for Aboriginal peoples is championed as a great equalizer and antithetical to a future of incarceration. Even though Aboriginal peoples are experiencing upward trends in education, they continue to be incarcerated at ten times the rate of their non-Aboriginal counterparts in the Canadian prairies. This study explores the discursive connections between education and incarceration for Aboriginal students. Specifically, the researcher sought to understand how educators’ normative discourses about learning and school legitimize and make possible the criminalization of Aboriginal students, and how educators work to disrupt normative discourses and open up possibilities for who can be a learner. This study is informed by multiple race frameworks, and poststructural theorizing about knowledge, power and subjectivities, and offers a discourse analysis of interviews with Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal educators working across one prairie province. The central finding of this thesis is that normative discourses about Aboriginal students are exclusionary discourses that position Aboriginal students outside of acceptable learner status, and effectively, outside of settler society. This argument is constructed over three interrelated chapters: Chapter Five demonstrates how cultural discourses are often racializing discourses that allow educators to evade considerations of racism and claim commitment to Aboriginal students, Chapter Six explores how inferiorizing discourses produce
Aboriginal students as impossible learners and naturalize schooling exclusions, and Chapter Seven presents the discourse of the taken-for-granted-as-troublesome Aboriginal male student and the normalization of a police presence in schools. Throughout each chapter, the author demonstrates how subjectivities imposed upon Aboriginal students are not only incommensurable with normative expectations of student behaviour, but also at odds with the imagined qualities of citizens of the nation state. Counter-narratives of participants who disrupt normative discourses and produce Aboriginal students as belonging in school are also included. Emphasizing the school as a powerful identity-making space where students learn who they are and where they belong in a settler society, the author suggests race power deployed through normative educational discourses naturalizes spaces of abjection as rightful spaces of belonging for Aboriginal peoples.
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Chapter 1
Introduction

One kilometre west of the city of Prince Albert, the federal Saskatchewan Penitentiary sits on the site of a former residential school. For Aboriginal youth, the irony is palpable: “prison has become, for many young Native people, the contemporary equivalent of what the Indian residential schools was for their parents” (Samuelson & Monture, 2008, p. 209). Aboriginal peoples represent four percent of Canada’s population yet account for 23 percent of its federal inmates (Office of the Correctional Investigator, 2013). As pointed out by former National Chief of the Assembly of First Nations Shawn Atleo, young Aboriginal men are more likely to go to jail than complete high school (Therein, 2011). This comparison requires attention, as the exclusionary processes that lead to disproportionate numbers of racialized youth in prison often begin in schools (Swain & Noblit, 2011). Although Aboriginal over-incarceration has primarily been studied within the disciplines of law and criminal justice, it is also an educational issue (Meiners, 2007). Positive school experiences lessen the likelihood of contact with the criminal justice system; however, Aboriginal youth face verbal and psychological abuse, low expectations from teachers and administrators, marginalization and isolation, a denial of professional support and attention, the discriminatory application of rules and procedures, and the disregard of Aboriginal history and experience (St. Denis, 2010; St. Denis & Hampton, 2002). What happens to students at school is not only experienced by students, but also constitutive of students. That is,  

1 For the purpose of this dissertation, the term “Aboriginal” is meant to encompass people categorized as non-status, status, Inuit, Métis, and First Nations (First Nations refers to Aboriginal peoples who are neither Inuit or Métis). While recognizing that one term cannot encapsulate the diversity found within Aboriginal cultures and languages, I will follow the direction of the Royal Commission of Aboriginal Peoples and use the term Aboriginal peoples. When I quote or paraphrase authors, I shall employ the author’s terminology in order to respect the right of people to name themselves. Terms may also vary depending on the historical period, geographical context, or tribal group in question. Métis people are of primarily First Nations-French mixed ancestry, who trace their origins to Southern Manitoba but today include other people of mixed ancestry. Canada’s Inuit population traces their origins to the far North.
the formidable force of schooling experiences lies in their identity-making power and subjectivating capacity to press upon students and educators a law of truth that they must recognize, and which others must recognize in them (Foucault, 1982). This form of power circulates in schools through discourses, the bodies of knowledge that are taken as truth, regulate what can and cannot be said, and constitute subjectivities. Through an understanding of discursive power, it is possible to shed light on what makes the discriminatory treatment of Aboriginal students in school possible. Through the same lens, we are able to see how the making of students’ subjectivities pivots around categories of race, class, and gender, and how these subjectivities constrain or enable students’ possibilities in larger society. This study is concerned with how educational discourses, as they constitute Aboriginal students, are linked to the possibility to “be” a criminal.

Guided by a poststructural paradigm that employs a discourse analysis to transcripts generated from semi-structured interviews with teachers and administrators working with Aboriginal students across one prairie province, this thesis responds to the following questions: 1) How do normative discourses about learning and school legitimize and make possible the criminalization of Aboriginal students? 2) How do educators work to disrupt normative discourses in order to reconstitute Aboriginal students and open up possibilities for who can be a learner?

Employing a lens of critical criminology, this thesis rejects the ideology of individualism for understanding over-incarceration. Drawing on Muntaqum, Meiners (2007) contends “what is defined by law as a criminal act and who is criminalized, is a result of interlocking institutions, histories, and forces: racial, political, economic, and more” (p. 20). Indeed, the processes by which individuals come to be designated as criminals in the context of this study are inseparable from ongoing colonialism and white dominance. Criminalization is understood in this study as a process that not only includes imprisonment and the act of being charged with a crime as
defined by law, but the ways in which individuals are treated as if they pose a threat to the safety of society. In school settings, criminalization not occurs through the over-management and over-discipline of youth, but also through schooling exclusions that produce students as “uneducable public enemies” (Meiners, 2007, p. 7). The central argument of this thesis, supported by the discourse analysis, is that prevailing educational discourses in the geographical context of this study produce Aboriginal peoples as outsiders, through their positioning as subjects devoid of the qualities and values of settler colonial society. As the title suggests, Aboriginal students may be in the school but they are not of the school. I borrow this frame of analysis from Razack (2014), who argues that while Aboriginal peoples may be in the colonial city, Aboriginal peoples are not of the colonial city.

**Genesis of the Dissertation**

The idea for this dissertation began several years ago during my work as an elementary school teacher. No single moment or event sparked my interest in the topic; rather, the idea came from everyday moments at school that prompted me to question the taken-for-granted oppression of non-normative students whose failures, disappointments, and frustrations within the walls of the school were often constructed as their own fault. I was especially interested in how non-normative students—namely, racialized students, students with disabilities, low-income students, gender-non-conforming students, and everyone who did not fit into the restrictive parameters of a “good” student—were produced as abject subjects within everyday, and typically unquestioned, school events: Kenny, red-faced and frustrated, struggling to print a perfect row of a’s during a recess detention; Hope, confused after being denied participation in the school talent show because she is not enrolled in singing lessons; Geri, crestfallen as she puts down her paints and follows the special education teacher; Ryan, calling himself stupid as tears stream down his face; and Carson, sitting for hours by himself on a chair in a corner of the library. While I knew then
that there was something powerful at play in these moments, I did not yet have the language to name systems of oppression and their inseparability from subjectivation (Foucault, 1982). Today, I understand the identity-making power of these moments; both students and teachers were learning who they were, which included their place in the school (if they had one at all) and also their place in wider society. These moments are also demonstrative of how the discursive restrictions for being recognized as a “good” student often mean that non-dominant ways of being are singled out, constructed as intolerable, or “chased down” (Baker, 2002).

I learned that any attempts on my part to challenge oppression also meant disrupting my own teacher identity; I became aware that traditional ways of performing the role of “good” teacher, which provided great comfort to the parent and teacher community, usually did not include anti-oppressive practice. From my very first year as a teacher, I knew what good teachers were and were not “supposed” to be doing. Carol Schick’s (2000) description of standing before her classroom on her first day of teaching and suddenly realizing she knew the exact words in the script of the performance she was about to enact resonates deeply with my own experiences in the classroom. It is impossible to count the number of times I participated in the reiteration and reinscription of “good” teacher discourses, as “unconsciously as breathing” (Schick, 2000, p. 301). By aiming to examine teachers’ discourses for their criminalizing effects on Aboriginal students, my research follows Schick’s (2000) assumption that the unspoken norms of teaching are often “reproduced as cultural practices of racial domination” (p. 300).

I started graduate studies in education convinced that “something was very wrong with our current social order and that the regular and predictable failure of students based on race, class and/or gender must be challenged” (Ladson-Billings, 2004, p. xiii). As I became immersed in the work of critical pedagogues and anti-oppressive educationalists, and acquired the language to name what it was that left me so disturbed, I began to believe the oppression of Aboriginal

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2 My interest in the contradiction between anti-oppressive practice and good teacher discourses led me to write a master’s thesis on the topic in 2008 (see Gebhard, 2008).
students in school was the most pervasive form of oppression in my own social context, yet it was also that least likely to be questioned. This connected to my interest in the taken-for-grantedness of oppressive norms, which later became fitting for a paradigm of poststructuralism. It also became clear to me that what was happening in schools to Aboriginal students reflected the subjugation of Aboriginal peoples more broadly in Canadian settler colonial society. This subjugation included a penal system that disproportionately incarcerates Aboriginal peoples. I wondered: What do teachers have to do with this injustice, and more specifically, to the naturalization of Aboriginal incarceration? That is, how do teachers contribute to making this injustice unremarkable, acceptable, and inevitable? Erica Meiners (2007) writes about her own sense of urgency to connect the spheres of her two major teaching sites, “a high school program for formerly incarcerated men and women, and a teacher education program in a university” (p. 10). Her story encouraged me to question how the penal enclosures that were part of my everyday landscape connected to the classroom—and specifically, to those subjectivating moments of everyday life at school. What was it about the way that Aboriginal students were being produced in the space of the school that contributed to the acceptance of future incarceration as natural and inevitable? This section has provided a summary of my personal connections to the dissertation topic. The remainder of this thesis represents the story of how I materialized and made sense of my research aims, and the knowledge produced as a result.

**Research Setting**

The geographical location of this study is the Canadian prairies. Participants in this study are educators who, at the time of the study, were working in and around the three largest urban centres of one Canadian prairie province. Canada’s prairie provinces include Alberta, Saskatchewan, and Manitoba, which are bordered on the south by the United States of Montana,
North Dakota, and Minnesota, and to the north, by the Northwest Territories and Nunavut. The prairie provinces are populated by Indigenous peoples and settlers, the latter referring to relative newcomers as well as those who have occupied the land for several generations. In 2011, close to 60 percent of the Aboriginal population of Canada lived in the western provinces, which include British Columbia (16.6 percent), Alberta (15.8 percent), Manitoba (14 percent) and Saskatchewan (11.3 percent) (Aylsworth & Trovato, 2012). Before European colonization, Indigenous peoples occupied the land for approximately 11,000 years (Stonechild, 2006). Their descendants are culturally and linguistically diverse nations and communities, including the Ojibway, Dene, Plains Cree, Swampy Cree, Woods Cree, Saulteaux, Assiniboine, Lakota, Dakota, Nakoda, and Métis. According to St. Denis (2007), “Aboriginal people [today] are no longer—as if they ever were—a homogenous Aboriginal people, but what does tie us together is a common experience with colonization and racialization” (p. 1087). Indeed, anti-Aboriginal sentiments are rampant across every city and rural area in the prairie provinces. Aboriginal peoples occupy the bottom rung of a racial hierarchy: referencing her 1998 study of Aboriginal teachers and the significance of race in their life and work, St. Denis (2007) cites one of her participants: “In Saskatchewan there’s nothing lower than being an Indian or looking like an Indian, whether or not you’re Métis, you’re Indian, it doesn’t matter” (p. 1081).

Aboriginal peoples in Canada live both on and off reserve, and it is the mainly off-reserve experiences of Aboriginal students and their teachers with which this study is concerned. Due to the confinement of Aboriginal peoples to reserves by the second half of the nineteenth century, “the presence of a significant Aboriginal population in an urban center is a relatively recent historical development” (Razack, 2000, p. 98). After the pass system—which made it illegal beginning in 1885 for First Nations peoples to leave their reserve without a government-issued pass—was abolished in the 1960s, and housing shortages stemming from government cutbacks worsened in reserves across Canada, Aboriginal peoples began to move into city centres to live
and work (Razack, 2000). The colonial project has ensured the “spatial containment of Aboriginal peoples to marginalized areas of the city, processes consolidated over three hundred years of colonization” (Razack, 2000, p. 97).

Currently, there are three basic models by which Aboriginal students receive primary and secondary education in Saskatchewan: 1) Federal schools controlled by the Department of Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development Canada; 2) Local schools operated by individual First Nations (also referred to as band-operated schools); and 3) Provincial and/or territorial public schools. Of 120,000 on-reserve First Nations students, 60 percent attend federal or band-operated schools on reserve. The remaining 40 percent attend provincial schools (St. Germain & Dyck, 2011). At the time of this study, all of the participants were working in provincial schools, and several had taught at one point in their career in a band-operated school.

As this study is concerned with school-aged Aboriginal peoples in particular, I refer to them throughout as Aboriginal youth, or Aboriginal students. Aboriginal youth under the age of 25 represent more than half of the Aboriginal population in Canada today; in Saskatchewan, it is predicted that by 2026, 36 percent of the population will be Aboriginal (Townsend & Wernick, 2008; see Steffler, 2008, for comprehensive statistics on youth populations and growth predictions). The lives of many Aboriginal youth today are deeply influenced by racism, ongoing colonialism, and poverty. Significant disparities exist between Aboriginal youth and Canadian youth in general, as evidenced by the former’s low rates of high school completion, high rates of incarceration, high rates of suicide, and economic disadvantages. These inequities stem from both historical and current injustices (Brown, Higgitt, Wingert, Miller & Morrissette, 2005; Castellano, 2008). “Issues facing [Aboriginal] youth are rooted in a history of colonization, dislocation from their traditional territories, communities and cultural traditions, and the inter-generational aspects of the residential school system” (Chalifoux & Johnston, 2003, as cited in

I recognize it is problematic to describe Aboriginal youth as if they represent a static identity category, which they do not. The Aboriginal youth to which the participants and I refer throughout this thesis are diverse in their tribal ancestry, linguistic and cultural traditions, family situations, hobbies, interests and passions, and educational experiences. As Brown, Higgitt, Wingert, Miller & Morissette (2005) explain, the situations of Aboriginal youth are multiple: “They may be interested in, or have experience with Traditional values, Western values, or both. Some have lived in the city their whole lives, or some are second or third generation urban residents. Others are in the city temporarily” (p. 85).

Situating the Research

School to Prison Pipeline.

The research questions of this study are situated in the context of larger debates concerning Aboriginal under-education and over-incarceration. This study’s focus on connections between education and incarceration situates it within an area of research known as the “school to prison pipeline” (Meiners, 2010a). Sander (2010) defines the school to prison pipeline as “systemic setbacks that gradually shepherd students away from positive school connections and into increasing criminal activity” (p. 2). This area of research has mainly stemmed from the work of researchers in the United States who have focused on young black and Latino males (e.g., Raffaele Mendez, 2003; Tuzzolo & Hewitt, 2006; Farmer, 2010; Schnyder, 2010; Urrieta, Martin & Robinson, 2011). Scholars have examined school and prison connections through processes of exclusion in schools, including: disciplinary culture, zero-tolerance policies, suspensions and expulsions, special education, alternative schooling programs, and inadequate funding and resources (e.g., Christle, Jolivette & Nelson, 2005; Meiners, 2007, 2011; Raible & Irizarry,
“Racial disparity in school discipline and achievement mirrors racially disproportionate minority confinement” (Raible & Irizarry, 2010, p. 1199), and it is well documented that racialized youth are more likely to be disciplined in school than their white counterparts (Watts & Erevelles, 2004; Monroe, 2005; Welch & Payne, 2010). The school to prison pipeline has not been explored in the Canadian context in relation to Aboriginal students, and in the United States, Aboriginal students have been the focus of very few studies. The work of Matthew Fletcher (2008) is exceptional; employing a framework of tribal critical race theory, he uses storytelling to construct a compelling narrative that exposes the criminalization and demonization of male American Indian students in one public school. And in a recent study, Walsh (2015) examined school disciplinary actions for American Indian students in Utah. She found, amongst other disparities, that American Indian students are four times more likely to receive a school disciplinary action in comparison to their white counterparts, and that they are the single most likely student population in Utah to be referred to law enforcement.

**Rationale.**

Initially, research on the school to prison pipeline focused largely on the impacts that suspension and expulsion, as well as the labelling and sorting of students, have on the likelihood of future incarceration (Tuzzolo & Hewitt, 2006). Research has since expanded to include the examination of "the policies, ideologies and local practices that move a select group of young people from schools to prisons" (Meiners, 2011, p. 548). According to Raible and Irizarry (2010), despite the lack of research on connections between schools and prisons outside of the United States, this is not a problem that belongs solely to the United States:

Given similar social dynamics between majority and minority populations across the globe and the historic uses of schooling to manage minority populations (see Spring,
2004), our colleagues outside the U.S. should be able to contribute research that uncovers the connections between schooling in their own societies and the over-representation of minority and immigrant populations in the penal system in their local contexts. (p. 1196)

Although the overrepresentation of Aboriginal peoples in custody and their low levels of educational achievement have been well documented, related evidence suggests research specific to the theme of the school to prison pipeline for Aboriginal students in the Canadian context is long overdue. In one large-scale, longitudinal study on young offenders of Aboriginal descent in British Columbia (Corrado & Cohen, 2002), it was found that 96 percent of males and 85 percent of females had previously been “in trouble” at school. The documented behaviours were those that could result in suspension or expulsion: “The most common form of trouble for both genders of Aboriginal youth [were] physical fights with students, teachers and administrators, drug use, cheating, and truancy” (p. 21). The average onset of trouble at school was reported as 10 years of age for males, and 10.6 for females. At the time the youth committed their most current offence, only half were enrolled in school, in which case they were two or three academic years behind their peers. Corrado and Cohen (2002) conclude that Aboriginal youth show a low commitment to school and “require education programs and strategies that will foster self-esteem, improve their overall reading and writing skills, and build a positive attitude and commitment to education” (p. 22), and do not consider how over-discipline and racialized surveillance may have influenced these students’ trajectories out of school and their levels of commitment. Another important point supporting the rationale for this study is that alternative schools in the prairie provinces are attended by predominantly Aboriginal students.

What sets scholars studying the school to prison pipeline apart from other social justice educationalists and critical pedagogues is their concern with how schooling exclusions not only set students up for educational failure due to the oppressive interplays and underpinnings of race, class, gender, and ability—but also increase students’ likelihood of future incarceration. Ending
the school to prison pipeline has thus become not only about preventing youth from coming into
contact with the justice system, but also about understanding schools as spaces of resistance to a
punitive society where prisons have become “an inevitable and permanent feature of our social
lives” (Davis, 2003, p. 9). Exactly what counts as educational exclusion and how the punitive
culture of school is best examined are questions related to theory and methodology, which I take
up in the following sections.

**Poststructural Approach.**

This study takes up a qualitative, poststructural approach. From the outset of my interest
in studying the relationship between schooling and incarceration for Aboriginal youth, I have
been interested in exploring the everyday work of teachers of Aboriginal students in order to link
the micro-processes in schools to larger social structures. While I remain concerned by the
oppressive structural conditions of the education and justice system, I am most interested in
understanding how these conditions are made *possible* through discourses found in everyday
language. This study makes remarkable what is most often perceived as unremarkable—the
everyday talk of educators—by demonstrating how educators “institute, solidify, change, create
and reproduce social formations” (Wetherell & Potter, 1992, p. 3), specifically as they relate to
Aboriginal criminalization. In this way, I also respond to Kumashiro’s (2009) assertion that it is
the most commonplace items in schools, the “hidden curriculum of oppression that permeates our
schools…that complicates any movement to reform curriculum and teach for social justice” (p.
33).

The poststructural approach of this study addresses what studies on the school to prison
pipeline have recognized, but not fully addressed. For example, Meiners (2007) asserts that the
movement of certain students from schools to prisons has become *naturalized*. This important
idea points to the need not only for reforms to school policies that, for example, allow
suspensions and expulsions to take place, but to examine the very discourses that legitimize and naturalize such policies in the first place. This study therefore responds to Meiners’s important arguments that schools are connected with prisons when schools legitimize and enhance fears that in turn require the intervention of the justice system, and that schools often espouse pedagogies and philosophies that uphold prisons as natural and just institutions. The poststructuralist approach of this study is concerned with the ideologies that undergird these perceptions, and also the processes by which these ideologies come to be known as “truth” (Wetherell & Potter, 1992). While it is these “truths” that oppress, it is with the production of these truths that this study is concerned, the ways in which they play out in everyday teacher talk and practice, and the subjectivities they produce for everyone involved.
Chapter 2
Theoretical Framework and Research Paradigm

This chapter delineates the theoretical framework and research paradigm of this dissertation. I begin by explaining qualitative research and the paradigm of poststructuralism, with the aim of specifically relating poststructural concepts to the study of race and racism in education. I discuss poststructuralism in educational research and outline the key poststructural principles that have informed this dissertation: discourse, discursive production, performativity, subjectivity, identity, subjects, subjectivation, and abjection. These principles are largely drawn from the work of French philosopher Michel Foucault, whom I cite directly, as well as scholars who draw on Foucault in their own poststructural research. The section on poststructuralism concludes with an overview of Foucauldian concepts of power. The last two sections of this chapter describe the additional frameworks I employ for theorizing race in this thesis: Critical Race Theory/Tribal Critical Race Theory and Critical Whiteness Studies.

Qualitative Research and Poststructualism

Qualitative research is an umbrella term for a vast number of possible paradigms. Although “there are as many kinds of qualitative research as there are qualitative researchers” (Hatch, 2002, p. 20), it is possible to sub-categorize qualitative researchers according to their paradigms. “Paradigms are…competing ways of thinking about how the world is or is not ordered, what counts as knowledge, and how and if knowledge can be gained” (Hatch, 2002, p. 20). They are “basic belief systems based on ontological, epistemological and methodological assumptions” that together represent a “worldview” (Guba & Lincoln, 1994, p. 105). The choice of the poststructural paradigm reflects my response to the defining questions of ontology,
epistemology, and methodology. In accordance with my responses to these key questions, this study is situated within the paradigm of poststructuralism. From the outset of my interest in studying the relationship between schooling and incarceration for Aboriginal students I have been inclined to employ a qualitative approach, as I am drawn to the idea that “qualitative researchers do not have to try and play God, writing as disembodied omniscient narrators claiming universal knowledge” (Richardson & St. Pierre, 2005, p. 961).

Poststructuralism is a branch of postmodernism. It seeks to deconstruct productions of singular, powerful truths reproduced through oppressive metanarratives. It is anti-foundationalist, anti-essentialist, and committed to a critique of the “common sense” assumptions that regulate and organize institutions. Poststructural theorists believe that “truths are always partial and knowledge is always ‘situated’—that is, produced by and for particular interests, in particular circumstances, at particular times” (Maclure, 2003, p. 175). Poststructuralists are interested in the ways that “forms of talk and writing give an effect of realism” (Wetherell & Potter, 1992, p. 94).

Poststructuralism in Education

In the midst of conservative educational research wherein the “good intentions behind educational institutions and practices are taken for granted” (Peters & Burbules, 2004, p. 4), poststructuralism is a marginal approach in the field. However, a number of scholars have taken up the challenges presented by poststructuralist theories for examining how schools maintain and perpetuate race, class, and gender-based inequalities and exclusions. Poststructural scholars focus on how normative discourses position students outside the parameters of acceptable and recognizable learner identities: examples include Sykes’s (2011) analysis of discrimination against non-normative bodies in physical education settings; Youdell’s (2003, 2006a, 2006b,

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3 Ontology: What is the form and nature of reality?; epistemology: What is the nature of the knower or would be knower and what could be known?; methodology: How can the would-be inquirer go about finding out whatever he or she believes can be known? (Guba & Lincoln, 1994, p. 108).
2011) poststructural engagements with ethnography in which she foregrounds the constitutive role of discourses; Kumashiro’s (2002) analysis of how oppression is citationally produced in schools; and Robinson, Saltmarsh, and Davies’s (2012) examination of how norms of gender, culture, and educational practice contribute to school violence. Importantly, poststructural scholars in education have demonstrated that the ways in which “students’ subjectivities are recognized, misrecognized or erased” (Sykes, 2011, p. 1) have material repercussions on students’ lives.

Poststructural scholars in education demonstrate that forms of oppression in schools, which include forms of racism, classism, sexism, or homophobia, do not exist in isolation from the wider socio-political climates of schooling contexts. According to Robinson, Saltmarsh, and Davies (2012), “as a microcosm of broader societies, schooling perpetuates many of the inequalities that underpin much social violence” (p. 9). The poststructuralist assertion that educational institutions uphold oppressive power structures is shared by critical education theorists (e.g., Apple, 2000, 2009; Freire, 1973; Kincheloe, 2004). Critical race theory arguments about institutional racism also resonate strongly with those offered by poststructuralists, in particular the perspective that racism is so pervasive it has become common sense (Youdell 2011). Understandings of racism and colonialism in this study are largely informed by critical race theory and tribal critical race theory, and I provide an outline of these in the next section. For the purpose of clarifying how poststructuralists differ from critical theorists in their approaches educational inequality, I borrow from Youdell (2006b):

Post-structural ideas do not come out of a rejection of concerns with material conditions. Rather, they come out of a recognition that existing structural understandings of the world, whether these focus on economic, social, ideological, or linguistic structures, do not offer all the tools that we need. In supplementing these tools, Foucault’s work reconfigures how we understand history, knowledge, the subject, and power…. 
Knowledge is understood not as a reflection and transmitter of external truths, but as contingent and constructed and linked intimately to power. The subject is understood not as pre-existing … but as subjectivated through her/his ongoing constitution in and by discourse. And power is understood not as wielded by the powerful over the powerless, but as at once productive and an effect of discourse (see Foucault, 1990, 1991). These ideas help us better understand how practices—located and real and constrained—make some things possible, or even likely, and other things all but impossible. (p. 35)

**Principles of Poststructuralism**

**Discourse.**

This inquiry makes use of a Foucauldian approach to discourse, which views discourse as being intimately linked to the deployment of power that is exercised within the social body (Foucault, 1980). “The eighteenth century invented…a synaptic regime of power, a regime of its exercise within the social body, rather than from above it” (Foucault, 1980, p. 39). In this regime, discourses are mechanisms of power that circulate within its capillary form of existence. They are “…regimes of truth that regulate behavior and ideological assumptions, and reinscribe the power relations within institutions” (Cary, 2006, p. 8). Discourses hold incredible power because they are “bodies of knowledge that are taken as ‘truth’ and through which we see the world” (Youdell, 2006a, p. 35). Discourses repeat and inscribe systems of meaning that “contribute to the ongoing constitution and bounding of what makes sense” (Youdell, 2006a, p. 35). Discourses do not reflect “truths,” but rather, “the very means and production of these truths” (Youdell, 2011, p. 25). In this sense, the metaphor of *construction* is important to understanding discourse; “in addition to stressing that accounts themselves are manufactured, the metaphor of construction emphasizes the role of discourse in constructing objects and subjects” (Wetherell & Potter, 1992,
Drawing on Foucault, Leonardo (2013) discusses how discourse is deployed as “race power” in a power/knowledge relation:

Race power is the master race’s ability to control how subordinated races become known, objects of knowledge, or subjects of race as a regulating discourse. Not only does it distinguish the knower from the non-knower, but it constitutes how they should be framed or made known. As a discourse, race positions people within circuits of meaning, usually through the privileged medium of language. (p. 122)

**Discursive Production & Performativity.**

Judith Butler’s concept of performativity is helpful in understanding the concept of discursive production and the idea of discourse as constitutive. Butler defines performativity as “that discursive practice that enacts or produces that which it names” (as cited in Youdell, 2003, p. 6). The theory of performativity has been central to Butler’s work that “seeks to undo normative categories that place rigid structures on how people live their lives” (Jackson & Mazzei, 2012, p. 67). Butler (2006) explains that she originally conceived the performativity of gender from Derrida’s reading of Kafka’s “Before the Law”: “There the one who waits for the law, sits before the door of the law, attributes a certain force to the law for which one waits” (p. xv). The performativity of gender revolves around this same anticipation: “The anticipation of gendered essence produces that which it posits as outside itself. Second, performativity is…a repetition and a ritual, which achieves its effects through its naturalization in the context of a body” (2006, p. xv). Youdell (2006b) explains that it is this concept of performativity that best demonstrates that discourse is not only descriptive, but also productive. For example, racial identity is constructed through the repeated performance of speech acts, or discourse; white, for example, has no meaning when separated from discourse. Subjects become racial subjects through repeated interpellations (Leonardo, 2013). While Judith Butler is best known for
theorizing gender with the concept of performativity, the concept has since been applied to race. Drawing from Derrida, Leonardo (2013) explains “without language, racism would likely not exist, or at least racism requires language to do its work” (p. 115). Employing Judith Butler’s framework of gender performativity, Leonardo (2013) explains, “racism and race relations function because they shore up racialized identities that do not precede them but are constitutive of them” (p. 120).

Central to this study is the assumption that Aboriginal students are discursively produced, or performatively constituted as certain types of subjects, through discourse. Youdell (2006a) uses the concept of performativity in order to theorize educational exclusion. In one ethnographic study, she demonstrates how certain students are constituted as “outside the bounds of acceptability as a student” through their “performatives that do not make sense in the discourses that frame schooling” (p. 45). According to Weedon (1997), institutions are “located in and structured by a particular discursive field. . . .Discursive fields consist of competing ways of giving meaning to the world and of organizing social institutions and processes. They offer the individual a range of modes of subjectivity” (p. 34). Within any institution, there are dominant and non-dominant discursive fields. Thus, as Youdell (2003, 2006a, 2006b) demonstrates, students are subjectivated—or given meaning—by discourses that position them on the inside or outside of acceptable learner status. The same can be said for teachers, who may be positioned on the inside or outside of acceptable teacher status. The particular versions of meaning privileged by institutions, or the dominant discursive fields, have major implications for educational inequality.
Discourse & Oppression.

The concepts of discourse and citation bring new ways of understanding how oppression plays out in schools. Kumashiro (2000) argues, “oppression originates in discourse, and, in particular, in the citing of particular discourses, which frame how people think, feel and interact. In other words, oppression is the citing of harmful discourses and the repetition of harmful histories” (p. 40). Kumashiro (2000) offers the example of how Asianness cites success over and over, and the harm that is done through these associations. Key to this study are the conflicted meanings associated with Aboriginal students, many of which are harmful and oppressive. In a study of Aboriginal teachers’ professional knowledge, St. Denis (2010) found that Aboriginal students are often characterized by non-Aboriginal teachers as lazy, unmotivated and indifferent, which results in lowered expectations of their ability and performance, and their guiding out of the mainstream (p. 42). Damaging citational practices, which are repeated over and over inside and outside of schools, become “naturalized” (Kumashiro, 2000, p. 42) and made into commonsense assumptions. In their everyday work, educators apply ideologically based terms, through discourse, that constitute students into multiple subject positions. These terms render certain behaviours and bodies acceptable or unacceptable, violent or non-violent, intelligent or deficient. Importantly, the latter citations also situate students as unintelligible or intelligible—either inside or outside the realm of an acceptable student.

Racist discourses, or harmful citations, do not exist in a vacuum, and it is the larger material effects and outcomes of these discourses with which this study is concerned. This study thus responds to Wetherell and Potter (1992), who advocate a shift from studying ideology per se to studying ideological outcomes. Wetherell and Potter (1992) argue that “racist discourse has the effect of categorizing, allocating and discriminating between certain groups” (p. 70). As I will demonstrate in the literature review section of this dissertation, systems of racial dominance
structure the political and social landscape of this inquiry. Inequalities between Aboriginals and non-Aboriginals are so enduring that in many ways they have come to be taken-for-granted, and it is this taken-for-grantedness of inequality, and the naturalization of the incarceration of Aboriginal peoples, that calls for poststructural approaches to the issue.

**Identity & Subjectivity.**

Identity and subjectivity are often used interchangeably, making them difficult concepts to separate. Youdell (2011) explains that poststructuralism theorizing of identity led to “a shift from the notion of identity to the notion of identification, allowing the focus to move from who a person ‘is’ to how a person identifies and is identified and to their sense of self or subjectivity” (p. 23). Woodward (1997) explains that although there is overlap between the concepts, they are not one and the same. Subjectivity includes our sense of self. It involves the conscious and unconscious thoughts and emotions which constitute our sense of “who we are” and the feelings that are brought to different positions within culture. . . . Yet we experience subjectivity in a social context where language and culture give meaning to our experience of ourselves and where we adopt an identity. (p. 39)

Youdell (2006a) explains that subjectivity is the individual’s “sense and experience of her/himself; as well as her/his audiences’ understanding of ‘who’ s/he is and can be” (p. 48). Race is a “formidable force in education” when teachers “fashion students’ subjectivity in racial terms” (Leonardo, 2013, p. 121). “The positions we take up and identify with constitute our identities. Subjectivity includes unconscious dimensions of the self and implies contradiction and change” (Woodward, 1997, p. 39). Thus, “the concept of subjectivity allows for an exploration of the feelings which are brought and the personal investment which is made in positions of identity and of the reasons why we are attached to particular identities” (Woodward, 1997, p. 39).
Identity indicates categories of classification and spaces of identification. “Identity categories are not so easy to give up—they are pressed upon us, are the condition of our recognition and are necessary signs under which to act” (Rasmussen, as cited in Youdell, 2011, p. 23). “To have any intelligibility, identifications rely on the repetition of social and material ‘acts’ through which they are recognized and have meaning” (Schick, 2000, p. 301). Normative identity categories are accomplished through discourse and practice. Identities may be socially, culturally, and institutionally assigned, and encourage normative identification and behavior; as identities are assumed, they are performed, often unconsciously. “Performatives make subjects through their deployment in the classificatory systems, categories, and names that are used to designate, differentiate, and sort people” (Youdell, 2011, p. 42). The performative is thus an aspect of subjectivation. Performatives also have to be recognizable “in the discourses that are circulating in the settings and moments in which they are deployed” (Youdell, 2011, p. 42).

**Subjects & Subjectivation.**

Subjectivation is another key concept I use throughout this study. It is the process by which persons are made into subjects. “Foucault shows how the person is subjected to relations of power as s/he is individualized, categorized, classified, hierarchized, normalized, surveilled and provoked to self-surveillance” (Youdell, 2006a, p. 41). These are all modes of subjectivation, defined by Foucault (1982) as:

a form of power [that] applies itself to immediate everyday life which categorizes the individual, marks him by his own individuality, attaches him to his own identity, imposes a law of truth on him which he must recognize and which others have to recognize in him. It is a form of power which makes individuals subjects. There are two meanings of the word “subject”: subject to someone else by control and dependence; and tied to his own
identity by a conscience or self-knowledge. Both meanings suggest a form of power which subjugates and makes subject to. (p. 781)

According to Foucault (1982), people are subjectivated through, and by, discourse: “Notions of subjectivation and performative constitution of the subject and the question of intelligibility… help us to understand…the limits of ‘who’ this subject might be and the constraints and disavowals that are intrinsic to particular subject positions” (Youdell, 2011, p. 41).

Poststructuralists reject the modernist assumption of a “centred” subject, existing naturally and pre-formed. Rather, subjects are understood to be culturally constructed, “inscribed by the meaning system that is language and discourses” (Usher & Edwards, 1994, p. 16). Weedon (1997) explains that as individuals enter social institutions, they learn the different modes of operation within them and the values that they “seek to maintain as true, natural or good” (p. 3). People may refuse, modify, or resist subject positions.

Identity-Making in Schools.

This study assumes schools are powerful sites where students develop a sense of who they are and their place of belonging (or not) in the world. “No other public institution is as crucial for the development of the identities children and young people will carry into adulthood” (Reay, 2010, p. 277). The core business of schools is “people production” (Reay, 2010). “Schools are also places where race is made and recreated. This process happens in subtle ways as students and educators more or less interact with the world more or less as unquestioned racial beings” (Leonardo, 2013, p. 120). This study is concerned with not only the ways in which Aboriginal students are subjectivated through discourse as criminals, but also how these subjectivations become their ways of understanding their possibilities for being in this world. The discourses that shape students’ schooling experiences produce “truths” about the students, and the poststructural rejection of a centred and rational self allows me to argue that these truths do have a far-
reaching impact on who students believe they are and can be. While both students and teachers possess agency in that they can (and do) resist identity categories and subjectivities that are pressed upon them, the fluidity of identity does not assume that we can all be whoever and whatever we strive to be. “Fluidity may be a great deal less fluid when examined in the institutional contexts of everyday lives” (Reay, 2010, p. 278).

Notions of the individual as a “free agent” have become particularly pervasive and within many of our assumptions about education (du Gay, 2007). As a consequence it is important in relation to issues of social inclusion and social exclusion in schools and classrooms to ensure there is also a focus on the ‘fixing’ mechanisms that limit the fluidity of identities and mitigate against individuals overcoming disadvantage (Skeggs, 2005a). The most obvious of these are the inequalities that arise from differences of race, ethnicity, sexuality, dis/ability, social class and gender. But there are further confounding factors based on, for example, locality, institutional ethos, levels of academic attainment, and crucially the attitudes and practices of more advantaged others (Butler, 2003; Butler with Robson). (Reay, 2010, p. 278)

Educators give different meanings to their students based upon who they understand them to be. To be recognized as learners, school subjects must enact a number of highly regulated social practices. This does not mean, however, that the identity category of “learner” is available to anyone; it is often withheld from many students on the basis of class, gender and race. Youdell (2006a) argues that when subjects are excluded from education, it is through processes that produce them as “impossible” students. Youdell (2006a) makes clear that thinking about how educational exclusions are produced in the everyday processes of schooling demands that these exclusions are not “understood as simply being experienced by students. Rather these must be understood as constitutive of the students, constitutions whose cumulative effects coagulate to limit ‘who’ a student can be, or even if s/he can be a student at all” (Youdell, 2006a, p. 13).
Importantly, Leonardo (2013) underlines that although race subjectivity does not necessarily determine how groups see themselves, when harmful representations of a racialized group “become the dominant and consistent associations for students of color, they begin to ‘believe’ the representations” (p. 121).

**Abjection.**

The consequences of being unintelligible as a student are explored in this dissertation. I make use of the term “abjection” in order to name the process by which Aboriginal students are made to be unrecognizable within the discourses that circulate in school settings: “The abject subject is the subject who is both outside the terms of recognizability and conceived as threatening to contaminate those within its terms. The abject subject is a risk, a threat and so must be expelled” (Youdell, 2011, p. 42). According to Kenway and Hickey-Moody (2009):

The abject [is] associated with those bodily fluids, people, objects and places that are couched as unclean, impure and even immoral. The abject disturbs “identity, system, order” (Kristeva, 1982, p. 4) and provokes the desire to expel the unclean to an outside, to create boundaries in order to establish the certainty of the self. It involves the production of social taboos and individual and group defenses. In so far as the abject challenges notions of identity and social order it “must” be cast out. Abjection involves the processes whereby that or those named unclean are reviled, repelled and resisted. But the “abject” does not respect such expulsions and boundaries and so constantly threatens to move across boundaries and contaminate. It is thus understood as a threat to “the pure and the proper” (p. 97).
**Foucauldian Concepts of Power.**

Foucault attempted to explain the operation of power in democratic societies where there are no dictators (Fendler, 2014). He was interested in forms of power beyond sovereign power, including disciplinary power, pastoral power, and bio-power, and the ways in which “power is appropriated, contested, and reproduced in daily social life, through the state apparatus certainly, but also through the intimate and interpersonal interactions among the state’s subjects/objects” (Thobani, 2007, p. 55). Whereas sovereign power is exercised “through physical punishment and rewards,” disciplinary power is exercised “through surveillance and knowledge” (Fendler, 2014, p. 190). Foucault’s work challenged dominant understandings of power as something exercised only by authority and the law, which he termed “juridico-discursive” power.

In *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (1979), Foucault traces the transformation of punishment as a public spectacle executed by authority to the emergence of the modern prison. As punishment became more humane, it was undergirded by complex interplays of power and knowledge developed by the social science disciplines. Foucault traces how discourses in the social sciences work as disciplinary technologies to produce docile subjects: “The human body was entering a machinery of power that explores it, breaks it down and rearranges it…Discipline produces subjected and practised bodies, docile bodies” (Foucault, 1979, p. 138). In other words, people self-regulate according to the knowledge that is made available to them, and this knowledge is often regulated through truth patterns produced by the human sciences (Fendler, 2014). Power, therefore, is deployed when forms of knowledge become truth.

Foucault (1979) examines the following techniques of disciplinary power employed by institutions: a) hierarchical observation, b) normalizing judgment, c) examination, d) panopticism, and e) surveillance. He argues that through these techniques, the rules that restrict ways of being become internalized, and individuals become self-governing. The disciplines’
production of “true” knowledge presses upon individuals the ways of being that make them intelligible. This is the power of subjectivation, which not only limits who individuals can be, but determines who they “already are.” The behaviour of individuals is thus regulated through the interplay of power and knowledge. Power, then, “must be analyzed as something which circulates, or rather as something which only functions in the form of a chain” (Foucault, 1980, p. 98). Foucault argues that these techniques of disciplinary power are at work in schools, hospitals, asylums, and army barracks. In the late seventeenth century, techniques of discipline were employed across institutions and spread from one another, “adopted in response to particular needs” (Foucault, 1979, p. 138).

In this thesis I am particularly concerned with how power circulates in schools through teachers’ language and produces subjects and relations that exclude Aboriginal students. In particular, I make use of Foucault’s concept of pastoral power, which he derived from the metaphor of the pastor and the traditions of Christianity. According to Foucault (1982):

[Pastoral] power is salvation oriented (as opposed to political power). It is oblative (as opposed to the principle of sovereignty); it is individualizing (as opposed to legal power); it is coextensive and continuous with life; it is linked with a production of truth—the truth of the individual himself. (p. 783)

In explicating pastoral power, Foucault underlines that while Christianity is well known for bringing about a different code of ethics, “less emphasis is usually placed on the fact that it proposed and spread new power relations throughout the ancient world” (Foucault, 1982, p. 783). Pastoral power “postulates the principle that certain individuals can, by their religious quality, serve others…It is a form of power whose ultimate aim is to assure individual salvation in the world” (Foucault, 1982, p. 783). Since its inception in the church, pastoral power has extended, “spread and multiplied beyond the ecclesiastical institution” (Foucault, 1982, p. 783). As new organizations made use of pastoral power, worldly aims such as health, wellbeing, protection,
and security took the place of religious aims. The objective was no longer only “leading people to their salvation in the next world but rather ensuring it in this world” (p. 783). The officials of pastoral power increased to include police, families, private ventures, welfare societies, philanthropists, and of course, teachers. Cavanagh (2001) argues that pastoral power in education is a pedagogical orientation in that it organizes relationships. While Cavanagh traces how the social studies curriculum “organizes the child’s relationship to formerly colonized peoples in Canada and abroad thought to be the savage, uncivilized, and in need of the very pedagogical discipline the Western citizen has to offer” (p. 403), I demonstrate in this thesis how pastoral power organizes teachers’ relationships to Aboriginal students and ways of knowing Aboriginal education.

**Critical Race Theory/Tribal Critical Race Theory**

The official version of the law that posits it as fair, just, and equal for everyone is encapsulated in the image of the young maiden who holds the scales to dispense justice:

A “maiden” is a virginal young (white?) woman—presumably untouched, untainted, or uncorrupted. That she is blindfolded suggests she is not swayed or influenced by the characteristics of those who stand before her—she sees no class, no gender, no race distinctions. The scales she is holding connote the measured and precise nature of the decisions produced. But the Official Version of Law is reflected in elements other than the symbol of the blindfolded maiden. In both its form and its method, law asserts its claim to be impartial, neutral and objective. (Comack, 1999, as cited in Brooks, 2008, p. 62)

Critical race theory is an intellectual paradigm employed by scholars in the disciplines of both law and education. Critical race theory emerged from the legal movement of critical legal studies in the 1980s, and was led by scholars such as Derrick Bell, Patricia Williams, and Mari Matsuda. Critical legal studies rejected traditional legal scholarship grounded in doctrinal analysis, but
despite its emphasis on contextual analysis, it failed to take race into consideration when examining inequality. Dissatisfied scholars formed critical race theory in response. “Critical race theorists posit that racial minorities are not equally served by the law because of their race, and that this is structural, not simply a product of jurists’ individual racism” (Brooks, 2008, p. 63). According to critical race theorists, the law deals not only in formal rules and procedures, but also in ideology and discourse. In these terms, law is not simply a formalized structure through which criminal cases are processed, but a contested terrain on which various discourses operate to produce and reproduce certain claims to “truth” (Comack & Balfour, 2004, p. 31).

Gloria Ladson-Billings and William Tate IV (1995) were responsible for bringing critical race theory into the field of education; they argued that class and gender-based explanations for inequities in school performance have proved insufficient, and that the “significance of race in education” (p. 50) needed uncovering. Scholars in education have since used it as an important tool to define, expose, and address inequities in education (Parker & Lynn, 2002). Critical race scholars in education are specifically concerned with the ideologies of meritocracy, liberalism, and colourblindness, which are embedded in mainstream educational policies and practices. Zamudio, Russell, Rios and Bridgeman (2011) propose the following basic assumptions of critical race theory in education: a) racism is endemic to society; b) history matters; c) the process of racialization is historical; d) voice matters (narratives from the oppressed contradict metanarratives); e) interpretation matters (understanding the complexities of race requires an interdisciplinary approach; and f) praxis matters (scholars must dedicate their work to the struggle for social justice).

While critical race theory was originally developed to address the civil rights issues of African American people, it has since been expanded to include branches such as Latino/a critical race theory (LatCrit), Asian critical race theory (Asian-Crit), and tribal critical race theory (TribalCrit) (Brayboy, 2005)—the theory most applicable to Aboriginal peoples in Canada.
Just as the basic premise of critical race theory is that racism is endemic to society, TribalCrit “emphasizes that colonization is endemic to society” (Brayboy, 2001, as cited in Brayboy, 2005, p. 429). Brayboy (2005) summarizes the nine tenets of TribalCrit: a) colonization is endemic to society; b) policies toward Indigenous peoples are rooted in materialism, white supremacy, and material desire; c) Indigenous peoples occupy a liminal space that accounts for both the political and racialized natures of [their] identities; d) Indigenous peoples desire tribal sovereignty, tribal autonomy, self-determination, and self-identification; e) culture, knowledge and power have new meaning through an Indigenous lens; f) policies against Indigenous peoples are linked to assimilation; g) tribal diversity is key to understanding the lived realities of Indigenous peoples, and to demonstrate individual and group difference; h) stories are legitimate sources of data and ways of being; i) scholars must work towards social change.

This study shares and takes inspiration from the theories outlined above. Specifically, this study foregrounds racism, colonialism, and history. By including diverse participants, this study also fulfills the tenet that voice matters, by including diverse, racialized teachers. This study also aims to work for social justice, as I am convinced that the work of educators should be to disrupt the status quo. However, my desire to work for social justice is coupled with my recognition that this is a contradictory endeavour that is always partial, and simultaneously oppressive and anti-oppressive. While my intention may be to work for social justice, this work will always exceed my intentions. In the discourse analysis of participants’ transcripts, counter-narratives are also presented, although my objective is not to provide a space for counter-narratives per se; rather, it is to examine the competing truths in participants’ discourses. While this study shares the critical race assumption that “the social construction of ‘race’ creates segments of the population who are subordinate” (Brooks, 2008, p. 63), from a poststructuralist perspective, I look to language to understand how this process of subordination happens.
Critical Whiteness Studies

This dissertation contributes to a field of study called whiteness studies. Whiteness “is a culturally constructed epistemological position of dominance effectively Othering all considered non-white. It creates the effect of power that excludes through objectifying and pathologizing their racial constructions” (Cary, 2006, p. 99). While for white people, whiteness is often “invisible, even while being the necessary standard against which otherness is marked” (Schick & St. Denis, 2005, p. 298), “whiteness is only invisible for those who inhabit it. For those who don’t, it is hard not to see whiteness; it even seems everywhere” (Ahmed, 2004, para. 1).

Whiteness began with Peggy McIntosh’s (1992) seminal essay on white privilege (Leonardo, 2013). “Overall, the innovation of Whiteness Studies has helped educators focus on the contours of racial privilege, or the other side of the racial question that has long been neglected” (Leonardo, 2013, p. 83). Whiteness studies seeks to challenge the construction of whiteness as a “normal, natural and therefore, privileged, signifier” (Rodriguez, 2000, p. 4). Max (2005) points out that much research about white people and Aboriginal communities focuses on learning about cultural norms, and “a huge void exists in the study of whiteness and white privilege as it relates to working with Aboriginal peoples” (p. 84). Scholars who study whiteness pose questions such as: “What have the effects been of whiteness as a social construction?; How and where has whiteness been deployed and for what purposes?; How can whiteness be understood or defined?; and What should we do about whiteness?” While the operation of whiteness in school “gives enormous privilege to those whose histories, ethnic backgrounds, social class, family assumptions, and personal knowledge are in line with these dominant practices” (Schick & St. Denis, 2005, p. 300), whiteness simultaneously works to disadvantage Aboriginal students by refusing to recognize them as valuable and worthwhile students, or as learners at all. Following Leonardo’s (2009b) critique that a focus on white privilege can serve to obfuscate white dominance as well as the agents of this dominance, I understand the discursive
processes through which Aboriginal students are made into racial subjects not as outcomes of white privilege, but of white dominance.
Chapter 3
Conceptual Framework

The previous chapter delineated the key poststructural concepts that underpin this study. I also included a discussion on how this study takes up the debates offered by Tribal/Critical race theory and whiteness studies. This chapter continues to outline the concepts and relevant background information that have informed this study, thus fulfilling the first step in the analysis of ideology: “First, the social scientist must describe the social field, history and social relations relevant to the area of investigation” (Thompson, 1984, as cited in Wetherell & Potter, 1992, p. 105). Providing a colonial backdrop for Aboriginal education and over-incarceration makes possible this study’s discursive analysis of contemporary colonial iterations. Monture-Angus (1995) asserts, “Law and education are two of the central institutions of processes through which First Nations have been colonized and oppressed. There are similar patterns in both systems of order” (p. 80). Foregrounding history in this study follows critical race theory’s rejection of ahistorical scholarship. By understanding the histories of law and education as colonial endeavours, I continue to borrow from TribalCrit. I begin this chapter by providing a literature review and history of white teachers. This is followed by discussion of how systems of racism and colonialism shape the context of this study. Last, I provide a historical backdrop and review of current trends related to Aboriginal education, and to Aboriginal peoples and the law.

White Teachers

Aboriginal students in the context of this study have a small chance of ever being taught by someone of similar ancestry. The student to Aboriginal teacher ratio is low across Canada. In the province of Saskatchewan, there are 271 Aboriginal students for every one Aboriginal teacher
A study conducted in an inner-city Winnipeg high school (Silver, Mallette, Greene, & Simard, 2002) reported that 96 percent of Aboriginal student respondents felt that there should be more Aboriginal teachers, and large numbers of students expressed the impossibility of their white teachers understanding or relating to them. According to Bear Nicholas (2001), “the business of training non-Native teachers to teach Native children has been somewhat of a growth industry reminiscent of the old missionary impulse” (p. 18). Schissel and Wotherspoon (2003) agree that the absence of Aboriginal teachers and administrators in schools is a central force in the continuing colonization of Aboriginal peoples.

Indeed, rarely do white teachers enter their classrooms equipped with critical understandings about race and inequality (e.g., St. Denis, 2010; Harper, 2004; Schick, 2002; Carr & Klassen, 1997). On the contrary, white teachers often display meritocratic and individualistic assumptions about themselves and the students they teach (e.g., Gebhard, 2008). Finney and Orr (1995) found that the majority of a group of white, pre-service teachers were ignorant of the history of abuse and subjugation of Aboriginal peoples by Europeans, and they “tended to view others as responsible for their own fates in a morally neutral and open, unstratified society” (p. 329). This belief in meritocracy also informed the same teachers’ understandings of Aboriginal peoples and the justice system, as demonstrated by one teacher’s comment: “Is their reason for returning to a life of crime because they lack self-confidence because of the reputation they have? Why don’t they try harder to change their way of living?” (p. 329). Carol Schick’s (2002) research demonstrates that white pre-service teachers often resist equity-based courses that aim to dismantle oppressive assumptions like those described above. Schick suggests that the anti-racist content in these courses pose a threat to the “heroic tales of successful occupation by white settlers” (p. 105) of these students’ ancestors.

The suggestion that the predominantly white teaching force is part of the complex web that links schools and incarceration is relatively novel, and by interviewing white teachers, this
study addresses the paucity of research in the area. Meiners (2007) was the first to make connections between the whiteness of the North American teaching force and the prison industrial complex. She calls on researchers to examine the contexts that shape the high numbers of white, female teachers in North American schools, and suggests that studying these contexts “may offer new opportunities to view the nexus of relationships between schools and jails, and options to interrupt this movement” (p. 43). Drawing on the work of Meiners (2007), Raible and Irizarry (2010) also make connections between white teachers and racialized prison populations. They contend that the majority of pre-service teachers try to preserve identities that “often revolve around conforming to traditional Western norms…as opposed to challenging injustice and oppression” (p. 1196). When these identities remain unchallenged, the result can be “the hyper-surveillance of poor, deviant students of color that can lead to school exclusion and, as data have demonstrated, lead them on a pathway to prison” (Raible and Irizarry, 2010, p. 1200).

**Historicity of White Teachers.**

The path of least resistance for non-Aboriginal teachers today is “to follow familiar colonial discourses that produced Aboriginal people outside settler society right from the start” (C. Schick, personal communication, October 31, 2014). The predominantly white teaching force in the context of this study is understood within the larger project of white supremacist nation building that is inseparable from Canada’s colonial history. In the beginning of mass public schooling, Canadian historians documented that “women were the ideal bodies to reproduce patriarchal values and colonial epistemologies, but not to challenge these frameworks” (Meiners, 2007, p. 46). White females were entrusted with the role of executing class-based surveillance and monitoring, and they were considered as unthreatening and cheap mechanisms to execute the work (Meiners, 2007). Along with the economic advantages of employing women, state leaders argued, “women teachers, like ideal mothers, would be morally pure and gentle guardians for

The “White Lady Bountiful” is a mythical representation of a missionary or teacher that emerged during the time of British imperialism. She was seen as having a unique duty to bring civilization to the “uncivilized.” In the early 1800s, her role was to educate British working-class women in religion, morality and hygiene. Exported to the colonies, the ideal of femininity became the white woman, an embodiment of chastity and purity who acted as a “civilizing” force. According to Honor Ford Smith, this image and role carries with it the imperative “to know” and the incredible arrogance of that imperative. Lady Bountiful, to be bountiful, must know and feel what is wrong and be able to fix it. She needs to be at the center but at the same time her needs—her own “self”—remain absent. Her ability to act as the civilizing force, to be the white teacher-mother in the service of the Empire, is dependent upon her need to be at the center, knowing and helping her charges. If Lady Bountiful doesn't know, can't feel, can't be in control, then she will feel guilt as well as the fear that she is unmotherly or unladylike or unchristian (Ford Smith, 1993). (Harper & Cavanagh, 1994, p. 28)

Meiners (2010b) has noticed that the persistence of the White Lady Bountiful in her teacher education programs makes it “difficult to address white supremacy, hetero-normativity and social class issues” (p. 85). Time and again, Meiners has noticed similarities amongst the students she teaches and the teacher archetype. As her students introduce themselves to the group, The majority of the students in [her] classes begin to evoke the same figure. This lady…has always loved children. She is gracious, nurturing, often soft-spoken and is usually married or engaged…For her, teaching is a calling or a vocation, and she has
always known that she wanted to be a teacher. . . . Sometimes, a redemptive narrative circulates: she has always had the desire to save underprivileged children. (p. 89)

Meiners argues the White Lady Bountiful archetype is an “often unacknowledged, [yet a] prevalent and persistent icon with significant consequences related to the linkages between schools and jails” (p. 46). Research suggests the White Lady Bountiful also exists within the Canadian context, where the underprivileged child she dreams about saving is often a racialized Aboriginal student. Schick (2000) found that white, female pre-service teachers in the province of Saskatchewan not only felt naturally suited to the teaching profession, but that several of them romanticized their future roles as teachers by imagining themselves saving children. Schissel and Wotherspoon (2003) argue that discourses of learning and virtue, of family involvement, and of the dedicated teacher with missionary zeal continue to frame compulsory education today.

The research of Cappello (2012) traces how teachers in Saskatchewan were trained for white supremacy in the early 1900s and the 1970s. The teacher population of today is the legacy of an education system implemented in the Canadian prairies in the late 1800s by the territorial government, after this responsibility was taken from the churches. The goal of realizing state-controlled national schools began with the creation of normal schools and teacher institutes, headed by David Goggin, a man deeply committed to four central features of British-Canadian citizenship that schools were to preserve: “Imperial patriotism; Protestantism; the English language; and cleanliness” (Axelrod, 1997, as cited in Cappello, 2012, p. 34). Drawing on the work of McDonald, Cappello (2012) demonstrates that “the spirit of Anglo-conformity motivated and shaped the direction of…education” (p. 35), and explains how rapid population growth in the Canadian prairies justified this emphasis. With an influx of newcomers from Ontario, the United States, and all over Europe, the population of Saskatchewan grew from about 20,000 in the 1880s to almost one million in the 1920s (Cappello, 2012). “Schools were to provide the means through which these disparate groups could be turned into subjects and full participants in the larger
Anglo society” (Cappello, 2012, p. 35). In response to past inconsistencies in teacher training, Goggin instituted normal schools to establish teaching standards (Cappello, 2012). Employing Foucault’s (1971) genealogical approach to the history of teacher education in Saskatchewan, Cappello’s dissertation “shows how practices of teacher education produce teaching subjects racialized as White” (p. 60). Cappello (2012) argues that white teachers were considered best suited to embody the Anglo-Saxon values that the nation required, which determined

Who then [could]/not be a teacher if these aspirations are to be realized.

Teaching…depends on the teacher being a particular kind of person, and depends on a particular kind of teaching subject. The teacher has to be White, has to hold Anglo-Saxon values, and as to be…a Protestant Christian. (p. 97)

Cappello points out that in Canada’s nation-building period, the centrality of race, Christianity, and nation in the *discourses of schooling* needed to be continuously cited because of “the fear that whiteness and the nation [had] not yet been accomplished…Teacher education [was] a place where this slippage could be guarded against” (pp. 97–98). Cappello’s textual analysis fast forwards to the 1970s and 1980s, a period influenced by the United States as opposed to the British Empire, which was characterized by a pushback by dominant white society. He argues that the pushback continued to be fuelled by the social imaginary of a nation falling behind other countries, with students ill-prepared to contribute to the new economy. Cappello emphasizes that while the texts at the turn of the century were marked by the ubiquity of race, the later period is characterized by “the celebration of cultures and multicultural policy” (p. 105). While race was no longer be mentioned, it remained just as salient. Cappello’s work is evidence that the project of white supremacy in teacher education has been successful—the good teacher has been produced as a white teacher. The inclusion of Cappello’s research, which underlines the central role that nation building has always played in the work of teachers, is important in setting the stage for the argument that nation building requires the criminalization of Aboriginal peoples. I
will demonstrate throughout this thesis that the work of nation building remains sedimented in contemporary discourses that produce Aboriginal peoples as non-learners and non-citizens.

**Foregrounding Racism and Colonialism**

Critical race theory allows me to begin with the assumption that racism is an endemic part of society (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012), and thus central in shaping the subjectivities of Aboriginal students. As I will demonstrate in the findings, even though there is nothing subtle about racism, its normalization does mean it can operate unnoticed, or under the guise of doing good:

In families, in schools, and in popular culture, racism is reproduced intergenerationally and by good people. This culture of white racism operates in ways that appear to be benign, unintentional, passive, or unknowing. It can only operate thusly because of its very normativeness, and because of the conventional consensus on the suspect nature of Aboriginal people. (Green, 2011, p. 239)

Tribal critical race theory calls for the foregrounding of colonialism (Brayboy, 2005)—imperative when examining the racism directed at Aboriginal peoples—because “racism is the legitimating ideology of colonialism” (Green, 2011, p. 239). “A central feature of the colonization of Aboriginal people occurred through the implementation of racialized ideology and racialized social relations” (St. Denis, 2007, p. 1071). Racism and colonialism are interlocking processes; colonialism requires racism, but all forms of racism do not necessarily sustain colonial domination. Anti-Aboriginal racism, however, has always served a colonizing purpose: “Through implicit and explicit designations of Aboriginal people and their use of the land as inferior to that of the colonizer/settler, the racialization of Aboriginal people justified and continues to justify the colonization of Aboriginal people and their lands” (St. Denis, 2007, 1071–1072). Colonialism is “not only about material accumulation but requires the production
of ideologies that justify the theft and violent practices at its root” (Said, 1979; 1994, as cited in Cannon & Sunseri, 2011, p. 275). Throughout this thesis, while I use the term “colonial discourses” to refer to discourses that sustain subordination of Aboriginal peoples, these discourses are also racist discourses. While the findings of this study do highlight how racism plays out through citational practices, and in this way offer a glimpse of what everyday racism looks like and sounds like, the larger objective is to demonstrate how this racism accomplishes the colonial project of criminalization.

Historically, the systems of law and education have been central to nation-making in Canada, a colonial project designed not only to gain control over Aboriginal peoples and the land, but one that has been purposefully genocidal and necessitates the continuous undermining of Aboriginal identity and sovereignty. Colonial policy has attempted to ensure that Aboriginal peoples could not flourish or compete with settler society, and that their spaces of belonging would be limited to substandard sections of land or neighbourhoods, or to prisons. The colonial strategies meant to suppress Aboriginal peoples in Canada were, and continue to be, successful. These strategies have included the Indian Act; the residential school system; and the treaties, which provided a legal pretext for the expropriation of the land base that would become Canada. The Indian Act, implemented in 1876, consolidated the various legislations and policies governing Native people and gave “the state powers that range from defining how one is born or naturalized into ‘Indian’ status to administering the estate of an Aboriginal person after death” (Henry, Tator, Mattis, & Rees, 1998, p. 130).

The Indian Act, as racialized and gendered a piece of legislation as one might encounter anywhere…has been aptly described as representing the “Euro-Canadian government’s apartheid system” (Goodleaf) and the “bureaucratized hatred” of Native peoples (Green). (Thobani, 2007, p. 2007).

4 See Thobani, 2007, pp. 88–95 for further information on how the Indian Act organized the governance of Aboriginal peoples separately from that of nationals.
The systemic difficulties Aboriginal peoples encounter today have stemmed from a long history of devastating state policy, even though popular discourses often reduce social issues to questions of culture and biological predisposition. Daschuk (2013), in his examination of the historical factors shaping divergences in health outcomes between Aboriginal inhabitants and newcomers on the Canadian plains from the early eighteenth century to the twentieth century, found that high rates of death in Aboriginal communities correlated with high degrees of contact with traders and missionaries. Daschuk also details Prime Minister John A. Macdonald’s purposeful withholding of emergency food rations to First Nations people during a widespread famine in the late nineteenth century. Macdonald promised to refuse rations to First Nations “until the Indians were on the verge of starvation, to reduce the expense” (p. 134). Available food rotted in storehouses. This dispels the convenient narrative that First Nations people were biologically inferior and prone to disease. Sarah Carter’s (2006) work has dispelled another convenient narrative—that First Nations people were disinterested in pursuing agriculture after settlers made traditional hunting impossible. In one example, Carter outlines the resolve of the Plains Cree to pursue agriculture and the government’s purposeful sabotage of their endeavours. State-sanctioned impediments to their progress included inadequate implements and livestock provisions in the treaties, such as “seed grain [that] arrived too late or in a damaged state, and wild Montana cattle [that] were distributed instead of domestic oxen” (p. 240); prohibitions in the Indian Act preventing Aboriginal peoples from moving, owning land, and conducting their own business affairs or taking out loans; physical weakness brought on by hunger and illness; the absence of milling facilities; and the location of reserves far away from markets and transportation (Carter, 2006). Today, “it remains important to deny that Aboriginal people could ever make use of such a valuable commodity as land” (Carter, 2006, p. 242).

Foregrounding colonialism alongside racism responds to the call for anti-racist scholarship and organizing to integrate an understanding of Canada as a colonialist state.
The view of Canada as a colonialist state requires the understanding that participation in settler colonialism (and anti-Aboriginal discrimination) is not confined to white settlers. The primary motivation for the majority of newcomers to Canada has been the prospect of economic opportunities not available to them in their homeland. “To different degrees every colonizer is privileged, at least comparatively so, ultimately to the detriment of the colonized” (Comack, 2012, p. 69). While settlers of colour have a complex relationship with settler projects, these relationships should not be ignored, for to ignore them is to be complicit with them (Cannon, 2012; Lawrence & Dua, 2011). Lawrence and Dua (2011) underline the contradictory and ironic stance of people of color organizing for anti-racism while participating in projects of ongoing colonialism, and the erasure of Indigenous histories in their own narratives of oppression. They provide the example of the history of the freed black slaves in Nova Scotia who were given the opportunity to purchase only the land unwanted by white settlers; unmentioned in this well-rehearsed narrative is that the land was previously stolen from Indigenous peoples, who did not have the same rights to the land as the freed slaves. However, settlers of colour are not positioned equally, and have not been equal partners in the colonial project (Lawrence and Dua, 2011; Cannon, 2012). As explained by Thobani (2007)

Colonial practices were developed and defended unabashedly by European power, the violence of this process implemented and sanctioned by the force of their states and the cooperation of their willing populations. Moreover, without the support or protection of the settler state, or indeed that of the states in their source countries, the immigrants categorized as “non-preferred races” had precious little room to manoeuvre in securing their own migrations, relocations, and access to citizenship. I argue that although the suffering of immigrants cannot be minimized neither can their participating in (and
benefiting from) the ongoing cultural and material domination of Aboriginal peoples. (p. 43).

Due to unequal positionings of settlers and different investments in colonialism, Cannon (2012) points out that engaging diasporic populations in thinking about Indigenous peoples and settler colonialism is an endeavour that often presents “emotional and psychic complexities” (p. 30). Despite this, Cannon argues that ignoring the relationships racialized settlers have with colonialism risks undermining the importance of alliance building between different racial groups, and the possibilities these relationships could have for projects of decolonization (Cannon, 2012). In consideration of the latter arguments, while I conclude racialized teachers may not be equal partners to whites in the undermining of Aboriginal students’ identity, that their inclusion as participants contributes to the broader dialogue on the participation and complicity of racialized peoples in Canada’s ongoing colonial project. “Every non-Indigenous person has a stake in making restitution for continuing colonial dominance” (Cannon, 2012, p. 33).

**Aboriginal Peoples and Education**

Bear Nicholas (2001) compares the euro-Canadian colonial education mission to a great white bird who regularly steals children with a spellbinding call: “Like the great white bird with its beautiful feather cloak and entrancing call, colonialism almost always appears benign. So effective is its disguise that it is rarely recognized in time for the evil it is” (p. 12). The foundations of Aboriginal schooling implemented by settlers were grounded in racist and inferiorizing ideologies about Aboriginal peoples. Before European contact, Indigenous Nations controlled their own education, which utilized community, family, and Elders as teachers. Larocque (1991) traces the racism in the school system to Euro-Canadian ideologies: “Historically, Europeans categorized themselves as the ‘civilized’ and Indians as the ‘savages.’ The underlying assumption was that, as ‘savages,’ Indians were at the bottom of human
development” (pp. 73–74). From European contact on, the history of Aboriginal education can be divided into colonial periods (Bear Nicholas, 2001). The first period corresponds to the fur trade era, during which the aim of Aboriginal education was on molding Aboriginal people into an exploitable and subservient class within, yet apart from, colonial society” (Altbach & Kelly, 1978, as cited in Bear Nicholas, 2001, p. 11). After the fall of New France in 1760, First Nations were dispossessed of their lands by British settlers. After Confederation in 1867, the first Indian Act was passed, and the Department of Indian affairs established. Schools were under contract with the federal government not only to “civilize and Christianize Native peoples” (Bear Nicholas, 2001, p. 12), but also to transform them into citizens of the new nation. Comeau (2005a), who refers to the late 1800s to early 1900s as the nation-building period in Canada, argues, “19th century colonials, and the policies, laws and institutions they produced, were inherently white supremacist, patriarchal, and bourgeois in nature” (p. 10). Nagel (1998) explains nation-building involves imagining a national past and present; “the tasks of defining community, of setting boundaries and of articulating national character, history and a vision for the future tend to emphasize both unity and ‘otherness’” (p. 248). Comeau asserts that during Canada’s nation-building period, “belief in the divinely ordained moral imperative to assimilate all others” justified efforts of the “colonial discursive apparatus” to:

• produce Canada as a nation and a citizenry that was white, middle class, English speaking and protestant [the construction of the colonizer identity] and

• to protect Canada and Canadian citizens from the threat of degeneracy said to be posed by racialized, classed and gendered Others [the construction of the colonized identity]. (p. 11)
Residential Schools.

The residential school system was a nation-building project that marked Aboriginal families for systematic destruction (Thobani, 2007). The purpose, according to Duncan Campbell Scott⁵, was

To be rid of the Indian question. That is [the] whole point. Our objective is to continue until there is not a single Indian in Canada that has not been absorbed into the body politic, and there is no Indian problem. (as cited in Thobani, 2007, p. 198)

Between 1846 and 1984, the residential school system took thousands of Aboriginal children great distances from their home communities to attend church-run schools. This system was “aimed at effecting cultural genocide and assimilation on children…The residential school experience is characterized by forced removal from families; systemic and ritualized physical and sexual assault; spiritual, psychological and emotional abuse; and malnutrition, inhumane living conditions, death, and murder” (Cannon & Sunseri, 2011, p. 278). By the 1930s, 80 residential schools were spread across the country, attended by some 150,000 First Nation, Métis, and Inuit children (Comack, 2012). The administration of residential schools was delegated by the government to religious organizations, which enforced strict discipline “based on the utopian models of prisons that advocated hard labor, discipline, religion and solitary meditation” (Schissel & Wotherspoon, 2003, p. 36). Described as “internment camps for Indian children” by the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (Thobani, 2007, p. 200), the infamous objective of the Residential school system was to “kill the Indian in the child.”⁶ The residential school policy produced Aboriginal homes as dangerous, and claimed that the separation from deleterious home

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⁵ Deputy superintendent of the Department of Indian Affairs from 1913 to 1932.

⁶ The term “killing the Indian in the child” is widely used in referring to the goal of Canada’s Indian Residential schools. It is difficult to attribute the utterance to any particular source because, while it has been commonly attributed to Duncan Campbell Scott, some claimed that it “belongs to an American military officer” (Sniderman, 2013).
influences was necessary. “Federal legislation passed in 1894 allowed for fines or jail terms for parents who resisted the taking of their children” (Comack, 2012, p. 72).

At a time when the European family was considered a “haven in a heartless world,” and prime importance was placed on educating European women to become good mothers, the removal of Aboriginal children was widely sanctioned as a means to destroy Aboriginality (Arnup). Aboriginal women were already “wilded” in the settler imagination of the nineteenth century as sexual “savages,” and civilizing their children was deemed possible only if they were removed from these women’s care. (Thobani, 2007, p. 199)

Assimilation into settler society is believed to have been the ultimate goal of residential schools; “the task was to transform children from ‘savages’ to ‘citizens’ by inculcating the values of Christianity and industry so that the youngsters could take up positions of ‘functioning’ members of the emerging capitalist society” (Comack, 2012, p. 72). Chrisjohn, Young, and Mauran (2006), however, argue that residential schools serviced a much different goal that was nothing short of genocide. Indeed, residential schools were responsible for a great many deaths; Duncan Campbell Scott noted that approximately half of all students perished in the schools between 1867 and 1912, and the Bryce report found that an average of 42 percent died annually (Thobani, 2007, p. 200).

If Aboriginal peoples were not physically exterminated, the substandard education they received ensured they would occupy the bottom rungs of settler society. Residential schools “complemented the imposition of political and economic measures designed to subjugate and render economic competition with white settlers impossible” (Comeau, 2005a, p. 11). In their straightforward manner, Chrisjohn et al. (2006) explain why residential schools failed to meet their professed goal of preparing Aboriginal students for settler society:
Depending on where you place the mark on the time-line from 1867 to 1997, Aboriginal children are mentally inferior, right-brained, slow learners, suffering from attention-deficit disorder, have a learning style that predisposes them to ditch digging rather than mathematics, or display some kind of defect that makes it pointless to try and teach them, provide them with learning materials comparable to those made available to non-Aboriginal children, or even put up with them. (p. 279)

The above description of the subjectivities pressed upon Aboriginal students contradicts the position that residential schools were meant to assimilate Aboriginal peoples into settler society and would produce them as citizens. After the 1940s, residential schools began closing, and Aboriginal students were subsequently integrated into public schools—from which only a small number would graduate. It was not until the 1990s that settler society began to recognize the trauma purposely inflicted upon residential school attendees by the federal government. The work of Chrisjohn et al. (2006) details the clever rhetorical moves in mainstream discourses about residential schools that continue to pathologize Aboriginal peoples. Through extensive research on narratives about residential schools, they discovered a “standard story” in Canadian society, which is described in the following excerpt:

Residential schools were created out of the largess of the federal government and the missionary imperatives of the major churches as a means of bringing the advantages of Christian civilization to Aboriginal populations…Some of the means with which this task was undertaken may be seen to have been unfortunate, but it is important to understand that this work was undertaken with the best of humanitarian intentions. Now, in any large organization, isolated incidents of abuse may have occurred in some Indian Residential Schools…[I]ndividuals who attended Residential Schools now appear to be suffering low self-esteem, alcoholism, somatic disorders, violent tendencies, and other symptoms of psychological distress (called “Residential School Syndrome”). While these symptoms
seem endemic to Aboriginal Peoples in general…this is likely to have come about because successive generations of attendees passed along…their personal psychological problems to their home communities and, through factors such as inadequacy of parenting skills, perpetuated the symptomology, if not the syndrome. (p. 4)

Chrisjohn et al. assert that the regularity with which they encountered some version of the above account was disturbing, and even more so when they considered that little social scientific literature existed on the topic. Thobani (2007) discusses why the systemic nature of violence in residential schools has been ignored: “So deep was the historical investment in the representation of the nation-state as being engaged in a humanitarian and compassionate civilizing project that public knowledge about the extent of the abuse…did not prevent its ongoing occurrence” (p. 201). In the 1960s and 1970s, the residential school system was replaced by the child protection system. Social problems that were the direct legacy of residential schools were subsequently used by the child welfare system to legitimize its apprehension of Aboriginal children (Thobani, 2007).

The residential school system has received government attention and media coverage in recent years. In 2008, Prime Minister Stephen Harper offered a statement of apology to former students of Residential schools on behalf of the Government of Canada (Government of Canada, 2010). Subsequently, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (TRC) was created by the parties to the Indian Residential Schools Class Action Settlement Agreement to determine the truth about Canada’s residential schools and establish a reconciliation process. After several years of in-depth research into the residential schools, which included gathering statements from residential school survivors, a final report was released by the TRC in June 2015. According to Beverley McLachlin, the chief justice of the Supreme Court, and TRC Commission Chair Justice Murray Sinclair, the findings of the TRC point to cultural genocide (Tasker, 2015). The final report of the TRC includes calls to action for federal, provincial, territorial and Aboriginal
governments in the areas of child welfare, health, education, language and culture, and the justice system. Responses to this comprehensive list of calls for change to redress inequality are unknown as of yet.

**Period of Integration.**

Shortly after residential schools began to close, a policy of integration was put into effect in the 1950s. “Integration, as it occurred, can be described simply as the process of having Indian students attend public schools” (Kirkness, 1999, p. 4). In the 1960s, Aboriginal leaders began to raise concerns over the failure of the new system. In 1971, a report was issued on Aboriginal education that detailed the following failures of the integration model: a 96 percent drop-out rate; high rates of unemployment; inaccuracies and omissions relating to Aboriginal peoples in textbooks; unqualified teachers; and a lack of communication with Aboriginal parents (Kirkness, 1999, p. 5). When integration of Aboriginal students began, “Aboriginal students were often ‘ridiculed and socially isolated’ (Hawthorne, 1967, p. 136) and they reported, ‘feeling stupid all the time and not belonging’ (Hawthorne, 1967, p. 140) (St. Denis, 2010, p. 11). St. Denis (2010) traces research since the 1960s that evidences how schools have failed to work effectively and adequately with Aboriginal students up until the present day.

**Indian Control of Indian Education.**

In the wake of a 1971 school strike in northeastern Alberta, a working committee was established by the National Indian Brotherhood (known today as the Assembly of First Nations) to prepare a national position on education. The resulting policy of “Indian Control of Indian Education” was tabled and accepted by the federal government by 1973. The policy was based on parental responsibility and local control, and its long-term goals included greater retention of students, relevant curriculum, and teaching of Indigenous languages. By the late 1970s,
Aboriginal teacher education programs were being developed to increase the representation of Aboriginal teachers, who were believed to be “the vehicle for bringing change to improve schooling for Native children” (Bouvier, 1984). During this period, cultural revitalization became a primary focus of interventions in the education of Aboriginal students. Even though Indian Control of Indian Education specifically applied to on-reserve schools, the idea of cultural revitalization was embraced by off-reserve schools as well. This followed the 1967 Hawthorne Report by the Canadian government, which suggested the development of pride and dignity “as the solution to systemic problems resulting from the colonialism and racism [education] had perpetrated against Aboriginal people” (St. Denis, 2004, p. 37). Reclaiming a positive cultural identity would become increasingly central to mainstream solutions to educational inequality, and continues to reign supreme in educational circles today (St. Denis, 2004). In the following section, I return to the importance of cultural theories (not to be conflated with Cultural Studies as a framework for studying race) in shaping the landscape of Aboriginal education reform.

**Aboriginal Education Today.**

Aboriginal education continues to be fraught with contestation amid persistent concerns over the low educational outcomes for Aboriginal students across Canada, both on and off reserve. Shawn Atleo, former National Chief of the Assembly of First Nations, resigned in 2014 in response to controversy over the federal government’s proposed overhaul of Aboriginal education. Bill C-33, the *First Nations Control of First Nations Education Act*, which has since been tabled, proposes an overhaul of current funding approaches as well as support for language and culture programming. According to the Government of Canada, “the overriding goal of legislation is better outcomes for First Nations students” (Government of Canada, 2014). First Nations chiefs across Canada were divided over the bill, and many were skeptical of the supposed power that would be delegated to First Nations people.
Unequal education outcomes persist today, and are abundantly documented (Pelletier, Cottrell & Hardie, 2013). Research “has consistently pointed out that public education in Canada has continued to fail Aboriginal youth” (Kanu, 2011, p. 7). Despite ongoing disparities between non-Aboriginal and Aboriginal peoples in educational attainment at all levels, some gains have been made. Data from the 2011 Canadian census indicated that school completion rates for Aboriginal peoples are trending upwards (Government of Canada, 2013). Nevertheless, educationalists contend that “responding to the needs of Aboriginal learners to ensure more equitable outcomes is…the most compelling challenge currently facing…schools” (Pelletier et al, 2013). The language employed in this last statement characterizes the dominant approach to Aboriginal educational improvement initiatives; it implicitly blames Aboriginal students by implying they have special needs. This reification of difference is a trope within discourses of cultural incommensurability. Because the failure of the public education system in Canada has largely been explained with discourses of cultural incommensurability, “efforts of Aboriginal educators and communities are currently directed at restoring continuity between the home culture and the school” (Kanu, 2011, p. 7). In the next section, I provide a more detailed explanation and critique of cultural theories in Aboriginal education.

**Cultural Theories in Aboriginal Education**

Rather than acknowledging the need for a critical examination of how and why race matters in our society, it is often suggested that it is Aboriginal people and their culture that must be explained to and understood by those in position of racial dominance. (St. Denis, 2011a, pp. 177–178).

Cultural approaches in Aboriginal education can be traced to anthropological traditions; historically, anthropologists have shown a keen interest in studying “real and authentic Indians” as opposed to those who have adapted to changing social and political situations (St. Denis,
The impact of this tradition on educational spheres has been enormous: internationally, lower rates of academic success amongst Aboriginal students have been consistently explained “in terms of discontinuity between the cultural patterns of these students and the processes, environments, and requirements of the school” (Kanu, 2011, p. 4). The Canadian context is no exception; proposed solutions to educational inequality for Aboriginal peoples across Canada have been rooted in cultural theories since the 1967 Hawthorne Report (St. Denis, 2004). Schick (2009) is critical of a cultural approach as the “predominant discourse regarding First Nations and Métis education. [It] is found in curriculum policies at the highest levels of educational administration and is duly repeated throughout school divisions and individual schools in the province” (p. 114). Rightly or wrongly, the cultural approach is taken for granted as the best approach in both scholarly and everyday circles: “the assumption is that the integration of Aboriginal cultural socialization processes…will create links between the home and school cultures and motivate Aboriginal students to learn in school” (Kanu, 2011, p. 5). Schick (2009) points out that cultural approaches are difficult to dislodge because they fit well with Canadian narratives on cultural celebration: “Official multiculturalism is a well-known trope of Canadian identity and a popular discourse for promoting harmony and understanding” (Schick, 2009, p. 114).

This study follows the work of scholars who reject cultural lenses for understanding Aboriginal under-education and insist on a race-based analysis (e.g., Green, 2011; Razack, 1998; Schick, 2009; St. Denis, 2004; St. Denis, 2007; St. Denis, 2011a). It is important to underline that this rejection is not a complete dismissal of calls for the integration of Aboriginal content into the curriculum, decolonizing curricular knowledge, or cultural revitalization. Rather, it stems from the assumption that “a culture framework for analysis is partial and inadequate on its own for explaining Aboriginal educational failures and that culturally based solutions can inadvertently contribute to further problems” (St. Denis, 2011a, p. 178).
It is also important to underline that critiques of the cultural approach have come about in light of dominant conceptions of culture, which, instead of recognizing culture as belonging to all peoples, and as “an organic, fluid process that constructs and describes the economic, social and historic milieu of individuals or a people at any one moment” (Schick & McNinch, 2009, p. xv), produces culture in an essentialist way “as if it were a bounded, definitional, unchanging quality” (Schick & McNinch, 2009, p. xiii). ‘‘Culture’ as a concept is usually applied only to specific groups who are designated ‘Other,’ … Similar behaviours … when echoed in the dominant, white population, tend not to be culturalized” (Jeffery & Nelson, 2009, p. 95). In the context of this study, the dominant assumption is that Aboriginal students and minority groups have culture while whites do not. Consequently, Aboriginal students “are seen to embody ‘difference’ which professionals must overcome when serving them” (Jeffery & Nelson, 2009, p. 95).

When aiming to locate the problem of inequality within pervasive racial discrimination, it is possible to see how essentialist cultural approaches are insufficient and can even be a barrier to the goals of anti-racism. “It is not the presence or lack of culture that has failed [Aboriginal] students so much as the structural and systemic racism in which student histories, economics and social lives are ignored and/or vilified” (Schick, 2009, p. 53). According to Razack (1998), the adoption of cross-cultural strategies “does little to ensure that white teachers will view their [racialized] pupils as capable of the same level of achievement and range of desires as their white students. Further, teachers are not pressed to examine whether the behaviour that is called cultural…is in fact a response to an alienating and racist environment” (p. 9). In their review of the literature on culturally responsive schooling for Indigenous youth, Castagno and Brayboy (2008) point out that racism in schools is rarely acknowledged, and argue that culturally responsive teaching for Indigenous youth must be understood as a response to racism. In a literature review on Aboriginal education across Canada, researchers St. Denis and Hampton (2002) found that “racism was present and active at all levels of public and post-secondary
education, including the Aboriginal teaching workforce. The racism experienced [by Aboriginal peoples] on an everyday basis took multiple forms” (p. 258).

St. Denis (2004, 2007, 2011a, 2011b) has provided excellent analyses explaining how an emphasis on culture often serves to recast the problem of under-education as belonging to Aboriginal peoples. St. Denis (2007) notes the irony in the suggestion that Aboriginal students are failing in school because they have too little culture when in the past, “failure was attributed to Aboriginal students who arrived at school with too much culture, especially culture that was incongruent with dominant school culture” (p. 1080). In order to adapt to changes brought about by colonization, Aboriginal peoples had to learn norms and practices “that would increase the success and acceptance of their children in a dominant society” (St. Denis, 2007, p. 1078), resulting in the current-day loss of Aboriginal languages and traditional cultural practices. When this disconnect with traditional culture is used to explain inequality, “Aboriginal ancestors and their descendants are produced as deviant once again, continually making the wrong decisions, and thereby held accountable for cultural and social change brought about by colonization” (St. Denis, 2007, p. 1078). St. Denis (2011a) further points out how twentieth-century social analysis on the incommensurability of Aboriginal and settler cultures downplays the impact of colonial oppression on Aboriginal students:

The idea that the cultural other is not able to make cultural adjustments without a great deal of trauma is an idea that continues to have a negative effect on discussions of how to improve educational achievement for Aboriginal students. To a large extent these discussions tend to promote a stereotyped idea of the Aboriginal student as vulnerable and non-resilient and enables the avoidance of addressing the far more difficult questions of racism and classism in education” (St. Denis, 2011a, p. 184).

This study responds to the paucity of research challenging the primacy of cultural theories of Aboriginal under-education. The findings of this thesis demonstrate how the hegemony of
cultural theories forestalls the possibility of identifying alternative explanations for, and solutions
to, Aboriginal under-education, and “lets those in positions of dominance off the hook for being
accountable for ongoing discrimination” (St. Denis, 2011a, p. 85). I trace the ways in which
teachers, despite their recognition of racism in their schools, cite discourses of culture to explain
educational inequality. I demonstrate how teachers’ language reflects Razack’s (1998) assertion
that modern racism is often culturalized; that is, inferiority is assumed through talk of cultural,
rather than biological (as it was in the past), differences. I further demonstrate how discourses
about culture reflect a changing landscape of anti-Aboriginal racism that requires new modes of
denial to absolve non-Aboriginal peoples of responsibility for inequality.

**Aboriginal Peoples and the Law**

European claims to colonial territories rested upon variations of the following themes:
indigenous peoples were not fully human; they were not Christian; they were not
civilized; they had not evolved; they were doomed to extinction by history and progress;
they had no recognizable legal system or concepts of property rights and were thus
lawless; and they did not cultivate their lands. (Thobani, 2007, p. 75–76)

While residential schools are now shuttered, penitentiaries have replaced them as the new
form of containment for Aboriginal peoples. In some cases they are even built on the grounds of
old residential schools, such as the Prince Albert federal penitentiary in Saskatchewan. As
Aboriginal rights advocate Michael Jackson has stated, “prison has become for many young
native people the contemporary equivalent of what the Indian residential school represented for
their parents” (1989, p. 4). While Aboriginal peoples today make up approximately three percent
of the Canadian population, they compose 17 percent of the federal inmate population (Wilson,
2013). In the prairie provinces, more than 60 percent of inmates are Aboriginal (Wilson, 2013).
Aboriginal youth are more likely to be victims of crime than their non-Aboriginal peers, and
are also more likely to be arrested and incarcerated for crime. They are jailed at earlier ages and for longer periods of time than non-Aboriginal youth (Kroes, 2008). Drawing from Schissel, Brooks (2008) points out the majority of youth “inside Canadian youth facilities are marginalized youth, forced to live on the fringes of society, and…often there for relatively minor crimes” (p. 60). According to Hogeveen (2005) the overrepresentation of Aboriginal youth in centres of detention indicates that native adolescents are not only “the most disadvantaged in Canadian society. They are also the most punishable” (p. 74). The legal principles and practices that have produced Aboriginal peoples as punishable, and their over-incarceration, are inseparable from Canada’s colonial history.

Prior to European contact, Aboriginal nations had their own traditions for maintaining peace in their communities, which have since been for the most part replaced by Western ways of meting out punishment (Smith, 2005). Traditional Aboriginal systems of governance contrasted the Western system of coercive force and control: “the laws were obeyed not through armed force that was alienated from the people—such as police, army etc.—but rather because the people agreed with the law. In fact they formulated them in the best interest of the community” (Maracle, 1996, as cited in Wickham, 2009, p. 61). “Indigenous knowledge and values are internalized as a societal code, whereas European laws are externally enforced by police officers, who become detectives of wrongful behaviour” (Little Bear, 2000, as cited in Wickham, 2009, p. 61). Alongside systems of education, white settlers imposed systems of law and order on Aboriginal communities that subjectivated them as lawless subjects. Thobani (2007) argues that while the legal system has been “implicated” in the country’s racist past, “the key point…is not that the law was discriminatory and that racism can be found in its rulings. It is that the Canadian legal system is a regime of racial power” (p. 98). It has been well documented that “the founding of the Canadian nation-state was predicated upon the disruption of Aboriginal societies, and the imposition of Europe’s legal regimes onto them” (Thobani, 2007, p. 78). The justice system
imposed on Aboriginal peoples was framed by liberal humanism, which has in turn informed popular theories used to study and explain crime today: “Consensus theories of crime presume that morality and the rules that control immoral behaviour are universal, and that ‘correction’ and punishment can change rule-breakers into law-abiding citizens” (Schissel, 2008, p. 30). Consensus theories of crime also “leave out the relationships between social and political power and the construction or definition of criminal behaviour” (Schissel, 2008, p. 30). Embedded in the Western system of law imposed on Aboriginal peoples is the philosophical framework that came about during the historical period of the Enlightenment, “when knowledge came to be based upon the principles of science and objectivity [and] matters of immorality became objective and observable” (Schissel, 2008, p. 15). This served the interests of white settlers, for whom the law did not only serve as a protective force, but constructed them as “exalted subjects” (Thobani, 2007). “The constitution of the national as a juridical subject enabled him/her to indeed become law-abiding in relation to the Indian” (Thobani, 2007, p. 37). Thobani (2007) draws on colonial theorist Franz Fanon, who specifically addressed the “establishment of western sovereign power as law in the colonial circumstance” (p. 71, emphasis added):

The colonial world emerged as a world divided: on the one side, a world of law, privilege, access to wealth, status and power for the settler; on the other, a world defined in law as being “lawless,” a world of poverty, squalor, and death for the native (Fanon, as cited in Thobani, p. 71).

Thobani argues that in Canada, this meant “breathing juridical force into the category Canadian while draining it out of the category Indian, solidifying and fixing their identities as different kinds of subjects (and objects) of power” (p. 71). White settlers cast Aboriginal peoples as uncivilized and deviant to justify the dislocation of First Nations peoples from their land, to serve their own financial and material gains, and to build white-supremacist policies, laws, and institutions (Comeau, 2005a).
Enduring narratives about peaceful settlement and frontier police forces as peacekeeping heroes are embedded in mainstream discourse, and thus difficult to trouble. Nettelbeck and Smandych (2010) point out that colonial societies have developed particular “foundational narratives” about their histories of European settlement, including the role of frontier police forces in managing and containing Aboriginal populations. According to Comack (2012),

One of the enduring components of Canada’s foundational narrative is that explorers and settlers arrived from Europe to a *terra nullius*, an “empty land,” that could be claimed and used for their own purposes. In this decidedly Eurocentric account, the original inhabitants of the land were depicted as “savages” in need of the civilizing influences of the European newcomers. (p. 69)

Comack (2012) explains that the precursor to the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP), the North West Mounted Police (NWMP), is an important part of Canada’s memory “in terms of its origins and purpose in relation to the Aboriginal people who populated the land that became known as the NorthWest Territories” (p. 66). The foundational narrative of the NWMP is a tale of benevolent do-gooders; according to the popular narrative, the organization was established in 1873 to protect the Aboriginal population of the Northwest from whiskey traders and outlaws, and “to ensure that all people of the Canadian North West—Indians and Métis, settlers and traders—might have the opportunity of living under a system of law impartially enforced and guaranteeing equal rights to all” (Brown and Brown, 1978, as cited in Comack, 2012, p. 67).

However, “the police were a central agency of colonization and key to the control of Aboriginal peoples” (Samuelson, 1995, as cited in Samuelson & Monture, 2008, p. 205). “Policing and punishment of Aboriginal peoples evolved as an inherent part of the process of colonial state building…Mounted Police Forces were actively required to ensure the submission of Indigenous peoples to colonial rule” (Nettlebeck & Smandych, 2010, p. 357). The NWMP played an important role in enforcing numerous laws designed to criminalize Aboriginal
peoples, including laws restricting traditional Aboriginal lifestyles and land use, outlawing religious practices and ceremonies, denying political participation to women, restricting Aboriginal peoples to reserves, and forcing children to attend residential schools. Under the Indian Act, Aboriginal peoples were confined to reserves, and registered Indians could not vote until 1960. According to Doxtator (2011), “during the nineteenth century, no other group in Canada was as closely regulated or controlled. Regulations were passed in the Canadian Government to control Indians—where they could live, how they were governed, how they should make their living” (p. 34).

In the 1960s, the high numbers of Aboriginal peoples in custody started to receive attention. A report released by the Canadian Corrections Association in 1967, entitled “Indians and the Law,” deemed sections of the Indian Act contrary to the Canadian Bill of Rights, and a special Aboriginal constable program was developed. Ever since the report, efforts to combat the problem of a disproportionately racialized prison population have centred on the paradigm of cultural differences, and have included cross-cultural training, affirmative action recruitment, and Aboriginal liaison committees or positions (Samuelson & Monture, 2008). “Cultural indigenization initiatives…are indeed of little value for transforming abusive police-Aboriginal relations as long as a basic race-based social inequality continues to exist” (Samuelson & Monture, 2008, p. 211).

Scholars have emphasized that there is no single cause of disproportionately high custody rates for Aboriginal youth and adults (e.g., Corrado, Cohen & Watkinson, 2008; Kroes, 2008; Monchalin, 2010). Among the explanations offered in the literature are racist policing, cultural clashes, under-education, poverty, substance abuse, inadequate rehabilitation and integration programs, lack of culturally relevant community programming, colonial institutions, punitive culture, unemployment, involvement in the child welfare system, fetal alcohol spectrum disorder, mental illness, family dysfunction, high residential mobility, single-parent families, and living
in crowded conditions (Corrado et al., 2008; Grekul & Sanderson, 2011; Latimer & Foss, 2004; Samuelson & Monture, 2008; Wickham, 2009; Williams, 2002). These factors are commonly understood as the part of the legacy of colonialism. While it is often noted that improving educational outcomes for Aboriginal peoples could lead to lower rates of incarceration (e.g., Corrado & Cohen, 2002), there is little research on how schools are directly addressing Aboriginal youth’s contact with the legal system, suggesting that the protective potential of schooling has not been sufficiently examined.

Government initiatives to lower rates of incarceration among Aboriginal peoples have proven largely ineffective (Monchalin, 2010). One important example of a large-scale policy change is the *Gladue* amendment to the Criminal Code of Canada in 1996. *Gladue* emphasized that alternatives to imprisonment ought to be given special consideration with Aboriginal offenders. However, there was never any training, direction, or oversight given to staff and judges on the policy change, and exactly how it has been applied is unknown (Wesley, 2012). Findings from a recent study (Gillies, Gebhard & Kayira, 2013) suggest that judges have largely misinterpreted *Gladue* and, in some cases, used it as a tool to discriminate against Aboriginal peoples. A second initiative, and one that is specific to youth, was the replacement of the *Young Offenders Act* with the *Youth Criminal Justice Act* (YCJA) in 2003. Among the changes in this new act are an emphasis on community alternatives to incarceration and the consideration of individual background and race in sentencing. Although rates of incarceration among Aboriginal youth have decreased since the implementation of YCJA, Aboriginal youth continue to be over-represented in the correctional system (Statistics Canada, 2014).
Chapter 4
Methodology

I have already outlined why the poststructuralist paradigm was chosen, its background in educational research, and how it is understood in the context of this study. I now turn to how poststructuralism informed the methods used to answer the following research questions:

1) How do normative discourses about learning and school legitimize and make possible the criminalization of Aboriginal students?

2) How do educators work to disrupt normative discourses in order to reconstitute Aboriginal students and open up possibilities for who can be a learner?7

I begin with a description of participant selection and recruitment, including a discussion of the methodological dilemmas encountered in recruiting participants and a step-by-step description of the process I followed. Second, I provide a description of each of the 13 participants whom I interviewed. Third, I offer a rationale for employing interviews as the method of data collection and a discussion of the attendant difficulties. Fourth, I describe how I conducted a discourse analysis of the 13 interview transcripts. I conclude the chapter with an overview of the dilemmas encountered during the data analysis.

Participant Selection and Recruitment

Methodological dilemmas.

I began this research with the intention of interviewing mainly white teachers based on research suggesting that they often take up problematic subject positions when working with racialized students, and are resistant to examining racism and white privilege (see literature review). I later decided to recruit racialized teachers on account of an understanding that “settlers

7 All data gathered for this study was collected with explicit permission from the participants and in full compliance with the University of Toronto Research Ethics Board guidelines.
are diverse—there are white settlers and brown settlers, and peoples in both groups make moves to innocence that attempt to deny and deflect their own complicity in settler colonialism” (Tuck & Yang, 2012, p. 10). Cannon (2012) points out the importance of involving all non-Aboriginal peoples in the production of research and theory, and notes that “engaging diasporic populations in thinking about Indigenous peoples and the history of settler colonialism” often presents “emotional and psychic complexities” (p. 30). Indeed, as a researcher, I was hesitant to interview non-white settlers for this project. After all, non-white settlers also face systemic racism and marginalization in Canadian society. However, where this study originates,

Aboriginal peoples form the greatest critical mass to challenge normative practices of a dominant white culture. The “other” is typically understood to be Aboriginal peoples, even though other visible minority groups also make the area their home (Schick & St. Denis, 2005, p. 297).

If colonialism is to be understood as ongoing, it must also be understood as happening alongside changes in Canada’s racial landscape; as noted by Justice Murray Sinclair, new Canadians must also be called upon to take responsibility for colonialism as they, too, benefit from it (Cannon, 2012). Of course, these benefits are unequal, and not always granted, and I recognize that settlers of colour are likely to share experiences of oppression similar to Aboriginal peoples.

As I moved forward, I dealt with a second methodological dilemma: Would I also ask Aboriginal peoples to be participants? My initial answer to this question was no, and I had made this decision for specific reasons. First, I wanted to avoid conducting research on Aboriginal peoples due to the oppressive history of this type of research (Smith, 2012) and an awareness of “the historical legacy of exploitation and subjugation experienced by indigenous peoples who have participated in Western science/research projects” (Halas, 2011, p. 5). In conducting research on Maori communities, Smith (2012) recounts a question she frequently heard from
community members: “Why do they always think that by looking at us they will find the answers to our problems, why don’t they look at themselves?” (p. 198). Looking to non-Aboriginal peoples to reveal reasons for inequality was what I felt needed to be done, especially if my point was to examine racial dominance. My intention was to shift responsibility for Aboriginal over-incarceration off the shoulders of Aboriginal peoples to emphasize that colonialism and racism are not problems belonging to Aboriginal peoples (Cannon, 2012). However, I came to realize that this decision was also problematic. By focusing solely on non-Aboriginal peoples, I was providing an opportunity for them to re-inscribe whiteness by offering solutions to the problem at hand. Therefore, when I began my recruiting and was contacted by Aboriginal educators wishing to participate in the study, I realized that to deny the educators participation would be to re-inscribe, rather than de-centre, whiteness. By including white, Aboriginal and racialized teachers in this study, I aimed to do the following: recognize that people from all backgrounds are invited to participate in colonialism—even Indigenous peoples; de-centre whiteness; and contribute to wider discussions on non-white settlers and ongoing colonialism.

My selection criteria for this study became the following: participants were required 1) To have teaching experience in the prairie province where the study took place, and 2) To have teaching experience with Aboriginal students. By engaging further in critical reflexivity throughout the research process, I realized that my initial plan to exclude Aboriginal peoples as potential participants was also part of a personal move to innocence. Paula Butler (2005), drawing on Heron and Razack, argues “we will make all kinds of psychological moves and shifts to maintain our sense of innocence and inherent goodness” (p. 129). If I did not include Aboriginal peoples, I could believe I was outside of the Western imperial project of researching Aboriginal peoples. In truth, my positionality as a white settler within the academy conducting “crisis research” (Smith, 2012) on Aboriginal peoples means I am never absolved of accountability for how my research might sustain relations of domination.
During the writing of this dissertation I was asked to explain how I attempted to work against the colonial legacy of social science research. The above paragraphs are part of my answer. The remainder of my answer revolves around refusing to subscribe to the notion that this research is “serving a greater good for ‘mankind,’ or serving a specific emancipatory goal for [Aboriginal communities]” (Smith, 2012, p. 2). I do not make any such claim. Despite a desire for this research to work towards dismantling inequality, the effects of this research will invariably deviate from my intentions. As Smith (2012) underlines, “belief in the ideal that benefiting mankind is indeed a primary outcome of scientific research is as much a reflection of ideology as it is of academic training” (p. 2). I recognize this research serves my own personal interests because it has been conducted towards the purpose of obtaining a doctoral degree. At the same time, it is my hope that the claims I make in this thesis can be used to support anti-oppressive pedagogy in schools.

Borrowing from Paula Butler (2005), I have wondered, “as a racially dominant researcher, how does one not colonize or re-secure dominance in the very process of carrying out research on white dominance?” (p. 131), or on any aspect of racism or colonialism? I believe the question of whether research can be an anti-colonial or an anti-racist tool is best answered by engaging with Kumashiro’s (2009) theorizing on anti-oppressive practice. He contends that anti-oppressive teaching practice is never fully and completely anti-oppressive. This theory can be applied to the researcher whose work has anti-oppressive aims, which are always contradictory. “No [research] practice, in and of itself, is anti-oppressive. A [research] practice can be anti-oppressive in one situation and quite oppressive in another” (Kumashiro, 2009, pp. 179–180). Just as Kumashiro contends that the identity of the anti-oppressive teacher is paradoxical, so too is the identity of the anti-oppressive researcher, “who is always trying to change what it means to be a [researcher]” (p. 180). While I have engaged in the process of becoming an anti-oppressive researcher, I never fully am one. Consequently, this research is always becoming anti-oppressive, but it never fully
Recruitment Process

I received ethical clearance for this project from the University of Toronto Research Ethics Board on March 13, 2013, and began recruitment shortly thereafter. I interviewed 13 participants in total, each recruited through professional and personal contacts. My first step was contacting people whom I assumed would know educators who would be willing to participate. My contacts included people I had met through a research assistantship position, friends, and acquaintances. I contacted potential participants either by phone or by email. Through email, I attached my recruitment poster and I asked the receiver to pass it on to any educator they felt might be interested. A few educators contacted me personally through email to express their interest, and others asked my contact to have me connect with them personally. In every case, once I was told an educator was interested in participating or knowing more, I followed up by telephone and sent them a formal letter of invitation to participate. I explained that should they wish to proceed, the next step would be setting up an interview.

Recruiting participants through professional and personal contacts proved successful for a number of reasons, although there were some drawbacks. I was able to recruit participants within a reasonable period of time, completing 12 interviews in the span of approximately three and a half months between mid-March and late-June 2013. The 13th and final interview was completed in October 2013. At this point, I felt I had sufficient data to answer my research questions, even though I had originally aimed for 15 participants. My method of recruitment also enabled me to easily recruit educators from different geographic areas. Furthermore, I was further able to recruit educators who represented a variety of subject positions in terms of gender and race by specifically asking my contacts to refer me to participants who were not white.

The main drawback of this method was that relying on professional and personal
contacts to disseminate my recruitment poster or talk to potential participants meant work and
time on their part. Several of my contacts were pleased to be of assistance, yet because I had to
maintain participant confidentiality I was unable to let my contacts know if the people they
referred me to had agreed to participate. I sensed dissatisfaction on their part that they were
unable to know the outcome of the considerable amount of effort they had invested, and I felt
awkward on a number of occasions when my contacts asked me if their referrals had agreed to
participate. In the future, I would make participant confidentiality clear at the outset so as to
avoid such awkward moments.

A second drawback was that my personal and professional contacts played a significant
role in shaping the participants selected for this research. Although I asked contacts to send my
recruitment letter to “any educator they know who might be interested,” I suspect they sent it to
educators they felt were more connected than others to my research interests. In more cases than
one, I had contacts tell me they knew very “suitable” educators, or even “the perfect person.” I
interpreted this to mean they were thought to be dedicated educators, and in particular, dedicated
to Métis and First Nations education. And, because of the significant number of First Nations and
Métis participants I ended up interviewing, I speculate that my contacts felt that First Nations and
Métis educators were more “suitable” participants. I believe this is consonant with the social
location of this study, where Aboriginal teachers often feel responsible for the success of
Aboriginal students, while non-Aboriginal teachers are more likely to blame students (St. Denis,
2010).

Participant Descriptions

At the time of the interview, three participants were teaching in the same school, although
each had been at the school for varying lengths of time and had very diverse past teaching
experiences in different schools. Two other participants were also teaching in the same school,
but again, their backgrounds and social locations were very different—one was a principal and
the other a teacher. I do not specify which participants are from the same schools in order to
ensure participant confidentiality. The remainder of participants hailed from different schools
across one province, including schools in larger urban centres as well as small towns in the
surrounding areas.

The short descriptions I provide below are meant to ensure the confidentiality of
participants. I have chosen pseudonyms for each (participants were asked to choose their own
pseudonyms, but all declined and requested that I choose one for them). The following
descriptions are based on my personal observations and participants’ own identity descriptions:
1) *Jo* (white, female) is in her late 40s. She has over 20 years of teaching experience in an urban
area, mostly in community—8—schools. At the time of the study, Jo was teaching in a community
school with predominantly Aboriginal students.

2) *Danielle* (First Nations, female) is in her mid 40s. She has over 15 years of teaching
experience in rural, city, and band-operated—9—schools.

3) *Dante* (Southeast Asian, male) is in his late 30s. He has over 15 years of teaching experience
in a variety of schools including alternative and community schools. At the time of the study,
Dante was an administrator in an elementary community school with predominantly Aboriginal
students.

4) *Rock* (white, male) is in his late 30s. He has over 15 years of teaching experience, mostly in
schools with predominantly white students. At the time of the study, Rock had recently started

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8 According to the Government of Saskatchewan (2012), in schools designated as “community”, “the diverse
learning needs of children and youth are met by incorporating a comprehensive range of effective educational
practices. Community Schools are responsive, inclusive, culturally affirming and academically challenging”. In
2004, fifty percent of students in community schools were of Aboriginal descent. Community schools are
predominantly located in lower socio-economic areas and in addition to their regular curriculum, provide students
and families with supports such as food and nutrition programs, extra-curricular activities, and in some cases, on-site
social workers and medical clinics.

9 Band operated schools are operated by individual First Nations. According to the Department of Aboriginal Affairs
and Northern Development Canada (AANDC), there are approximately 518 band-operated schools across Canada.
Band operated schools must ensure that their teachers are certified to teach in the band’s province and that the school
follows the provincial curriculum, adapted to reflect the First Nation’s language and culture, where possible (St.
Germain & Dyck, 2011).
teaching at an elementary community school with predominantly racialized and Aboriginal students.

5) Ryan (Métis, male) is in his early 30s. He had recently completed his teaching degree at the time of the interview, as well as a practicum in a community elementary school with predominantly Aboriginal students. At the time of the interview, Ryan was also working part-time as a substitute teacher in community schools.

6) Nicole (Aboriginal, female) is in her late 30s. She has over 14 years of teaching experience in alternative, community, and mainstream schools. At the time of the interview, Nicole was teaching in a mainstream high school with predominantly white students.

7) Barb (white, female) is in her 50s with over 30 years of teaching and administrative experience in community schools serving predominantly Aboriginal students. At the time of the interview, Barb was teaching in a K–12 community school with predominantly Aboriginal students.

8) Robin (Métis, female) is in her early 40s. She has over 10 years of teaching experience in alternative schools and community schools. At the time of the interview, Robin was teaching in a K8 community school with predominantly Aboriginal students.

9) Valerie (Métis, female) is in her early 50s. She has nine years of teaching experience in community schools with predominantly Aboriginal students, and in rural schools with predominantly white students. At the time of the interview, she was teaching in a school with predominantly white students and a small population of First Nations students bussed in from a nearby reserve.

10) Jasmine (South Asian, female) is in her 40s and has over 10 years teaching and administrative experience in mainstream and community schools. At the time of the interview, Jasmine was in her second year of working as an administrator in a community school with predominantly Aboriginal students.

11) Susan (white, female) is in her mid 40s and has taught in schools with predominantly white
students. At the time of the interview, she was in her first year of teaching in a community school with predominantly Aboriginal students.

12) *Lana* (white, female) is in her early 40s and has been teaching for over 20 years in band-operated, mainstream, and community schools. At the time of the study she was teaching in a mainstream school with an Aboriginal student population of about 50 percent.

13) *Melissa* (Métis, female) is in her late 20s and has three years of teaching experience in a community school with predominantly Aboriginal students.

**Data Sources and Collection**

The data sources for this study are transcripts originating from face-to-face interviews with participants. Prior to the interview, participants were given a consent form outlining the terms of their participation (See Appendix C). In addition to the letter, I orally reiterated the purpose of the research. I reminded participants that I would be asking them to respond to questions on a number of themes, and that they had the right to refuse to respond to any questions as well as to stop the interview at any time. I told participants that I would assure their confidentiality by replacing all names of people and locations with pseudonyms, as well as removing any information that would serve to identify them or their school. Before starting the recording device, I asked participants if they had any questions regarding their participation.

Why did I choose interviews as the method of data collection? Since the 1980s interviews have become key methods of social research. “Broad movements in philosophy influencing current social science emphasize key aspects of knowledge relevant to interview research” (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009, p. 11). Interviews are central to the postmodern emphasis on the social construction of knowledge (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009) and reflect the importance that poststructuralism places on language. What can interviews tell us? “Crucial things about a segment of society’s conversations with itself, about the ways in which the world is typically
legitimated, organized, and justified” (Van den Berg, Wetherell and Houtkoop-Steenstr, 2003, p. 13). Richardson and St. Pierre (2005) contend that “understanding language as competing discourses—competing ways of giving meaning and organizing the world—makes language a site of exploration and struggle” (p. 961). Interviews are potentially rich sources of data made up of layers of discourses. Hesse-Biber and Leavy (2010) contend that it is appropriate to use in-depth interviews when the researcher wishes to focus and gain information on a particular topic, as “the goal of intensive interviews is to gain rich qualitative data on a particular subject from the perspective of selected individuals” (p. 95). Wetherell and Potter (1992) agree that the interview allows the interviewer to cover the same themes with a number of individuals.

The interviews I conducted with my participants were *inter views* (Kvale and Brinkmann, 2009). Kvale and Brinkmann (2009) describe the research interview as based on the conversations of daily life; “it is an inter-view, where knowledge is constructed in the inter-action between the interviewer and the interviewee. An interview is literally an *inter view*, an interchange of views between two persons conversing about a theme of mutual interest” (p. 2). Kvale and Brinkmann’s emphasis on “the interdependence of human interaction and knowledge production” (p. 2) is central to the importance that poststructuralism places on the researcher’s inextricable links to the research in question, as well as the influence of the positionality of the interviewer and the interviewee on the knowledge constructed in the conversation. Wetherell and Potter (1992) explain that “the interviewer is contributing just as much as the interviewee... viewed in this way the orthodox idea that interviewers should be neutral and uninvolved as possible becomes highly problematic” (p. 99). The expectation that an interviewer can or should feign neutrality throughout the interview is a failure to take into consideration that the interview is not an egalitarian situation. It is the researcher who defines and controls the environment, introduces the topic of the interview, and follows up on the answers to the questions (Kvale and Brinkmann, 2009). Kvale and Brinkmann (2009) argue the qualitative
interview is a conversation with a clear “power asymmetry between the researcher and the subject” (p. 33).

I aimed to conduct the interviews in an active and interventionist manner, trying my best to be more of an “animated conversationalist,” providing “responses characteristic of informal talk,” and “questioning assumptions” (Wetherell & Potter, 1992, p. 99). The point of this was to access the “wide range of different sorts of arguing that participants may have produced outside of the interviews” (Wetherell & Potter, 1992, p. 99). These behaviours may be considered inappropriate in an orthodox interview, but are typical when interviews are conducted for discourse analysis (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). For example, when I asked Susan how her school supports Aboriginal students and she responded by naming cultural activities but also mentioning that she was not sure if cultural activities were really the answer to under-education, I pointed out the contradictory nature of her answer. However, I did not always feel comfortable questioning participants’ assumptions, and this often had to do with the multiple subject positions I occupied in relation to each of my participants. My subject positionings in relation to participants also influenced the questions I posed, and how I posed them. I felt more at ease being slightly more direct with my questions when I was interviewing participants with whom I assumed I had most in common—white women. However, this was not always the case if there was a large age difference. For example, when I interviewed Barb, who is white but is much older than I am and has much more teaching experience, I hesitated to question her answers. As I will discuss later, this hesitation also crept in during the data analysis. I also felt myself being less inclined to challenge the assumptions of the male participants during the interviews. Race, gender, and age were at play in the co-constructed knowledge of the interviews.

Given the nature of this research, the question of my racial identity in relation to those of my participants deserves more attention. According to Dei (2005), “the racial identity of the researcher and the subjects of study are important considerations in the process of knowledge
production” (Dei, 2005, p. 11). Specifically during interviews on the topic of racism, researchers have pointed out the importance of their own racialized identities in making their interviewees feel more at ease and willing to open up about their thoughts on racism. Writing about her doctoral research on racialized teachers, Hopson (2013) contends, “I believe that my presence as a racialized teacher in the role of the researcher who was able to share, positively contributed to the interview process” (p. 64). Song and Parker (1995) underscore the importance of their participants recognizing their shared experiences of racism and discrimination, which they saw as key to establishing trust in the interview (p. 248). One of my errors going into the interviews was my ignorance regarding how my own racial positionality would influence my participants’ answers and reactions. It was easy for me to see when my gender and age played a role in how the participants related to me, but it was not until later that I deeply reflected on the role of my racial identity. My assumption that participants would feel open and trusting towards me was whiteness creeping in—after all, what threat did I pose? This is not to say that I expected participants to divulge uncomfortable ideas or experiences to me, only that I did not think about how my own racial positionality might have rendered them apprehensive in doing so and influenced what they felt safe sharing with me.

However, I did notice that during the interviews, I felt inclined to let the Aboriginal participants know where I stood on the subject of racism. I felt it was important for participants to recognize that if they chose to discuss racism, their answers would not be negatively received—also, because addressing anti-Aboriginal racism is rare, and a topic most often unwelcomed by whites, I figured participants would not feel inclined to bring up the topic unless it was in some way authorized. At times I communicated this directly, and at times I think this came across throughout the interviews through my reactions, responses, and gestures. Many participants most likely recognized that I was authorizing discourses that named racism. What I did not think about at the time was that as a white woman, I do not take the same risks as a racialized person in
talking about racism. At one point during the interview, before discussing racism, Danielle said, “I’m glad this is anonymous, and I trust that it is…” I also fear speaking publicly about racism, but I can do so without needing to remain anonymous.

I also perceived that Aboriginal participants were more inclined to open up to me about racism towards the end of the interviews, and I speculate this is due to the recognition of where I stood as well as a development of trust that may have taken place. I feel this may have been the case for Robin and Valerie, who did not begin to name racism until the end of their interview. However, this is not to say that I feel my race ceased to be important. It is more than likely that a different interviewer would have elicited different types of answers and that the conversations would have evolved much differently.

It is important to connect questions of power asymmetry and positionality to the nature of the questions I posed. Following Comeau (2005b), “I acknowledge that the questions did invite certain conversations and foreclose others…Thus the questions were designed to elicit specific conversations” (p. 30). Using a semi-structured approach (Marshall and Rossman, 2006), I developed an interview guide with four main themes: general school descriptions, Aboriginal education, Aboriginal over-incarceration, and classroom management and discipline. I also generated a list of questions that fit under each theme (see Appendix A). “For the semi-structured type of interview, the guide will contain an outline of topics with suggested questions” (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009, p. 130). Rarely did I follow the questions in a linear way, or pose every single one. I admit that the varied ways in which each interview developed, and the different questions I posed, sometimes had to do with my desire to be viewed as a legitimate researcher in relation to the participant. This is to say that at times I questioned my questions, especially those with the racial dimensions. Of course, these were the questions most relevant to my research, for example:

*Do you feel that students are unfairly targeted for discipline because of their racial background?*

*Do you feel that there are any students who are unfairly targeted, or singled out, for not*
following rules or procedures? What made posing these questions easier was that I did so in the middle of the interview. However, what made it difficult was that by that point educators had already told me about their schools and their teaching practices, and posing these questions was often a challenge to what they had already shared with me. I will return to this subject in the Discourse Analysis portion of this section.

**Interview Transcription**

The process of transcription began shortly after each interview. Transcribing is a process of transformation (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009):

The audio recording of the interview involves a first abstraction from the live physical gesture of the conversing persons, with a loss of body language such as postures and gestures. The transcription of the interview conversation to a written form involves a second abstraction, where the tone of the voice, the intonations, and the breathing is lost. In short, transcriptions are impoverished, decontextualized renderings of live interview conversations. (p. 178)

Taking into consideration the above issues raised by Kvale and Brinkmann, much was lost in transcription—a process that highly influenced the analysis of this project. It is impossible to say exactly how the analysis would have been different without it, only that it surely would have been. At the same time, because I was present at the interviews, my memories of certain intonations, gestures, and social cues during the conversation influenced my analysis of the transcripts.

My chosen form of discourse analysis influenced the specific transcription methods. Although some forms of discourse analysis require a very rigid notation system, this was unnecessary due the type of analysis I was interested in. Following Wetherell and Potter (1992), my concern was “principally with the content of discourse and with broad argumentative
patterns” (p. 225). Consequently, I borrowed the following main conventions from Wetherell and Potter (1992): Pauses are untimed but marked with a dot in parentheses (.). Omitted material is marked by three dots (…). Speech errors and particles (e.g., umm, you know) are mostly included but are omitted when readability is compromised. Brief comments or acknowledgement tokens (e.g., mhmm, yes) are placed in round brackets. Explanatory material is placed in square brackets. “[I] have also added commas, full stops [periods], and question marks in a manner designed to improve the readability of the extracts while conveying their sense, as heard, as effectively as possible” (p. 226).

In the interest of sending the transcripts back to my participants as quickly as possible and beginning the formal data analysis, I hired a professional transcriber to transcribe six out of the 13 interviews, and I transcribed the remaining seven. As each transcription was completed, I emailed it to the participant and invited them to add to, change, or delete their responses. I formally began the analysis after each participant replied to me with any alterations to their transcript. The majority of participants did not request any changes.

I was aware that by hiring a transcriber and not completing all of the transcriptions myself, I was missing out on an opportunity to become familiar with the data in the way that is made possible through the process of transcription. Therefore, when the transcripts were returned to me, I read them over as I listened to the audio recordings. Although this was not the same as doing the transcription myself, this step did allow me the opportunity to carefully listen to the interviews. As I listened to them, I made only small changes in the transcripts, related mostly to punctuation and to enhance the readability of the text, being careful that this did not lead me to “tidy up the material” (Poland, 2008, p. 485) to the point that original meaning was lost. I did so while recognizing the impossibility of fully accomplishing this goal, since spoken and written text are never one and the same, and the spoken word does not closely parallel the written word. Consequently, there is a difference between the analysis of interviews and interview
transcripts, and this study focuses on the latter. Had the interviews been analyzed from a video or audio-recording, the findings would have likely been very different.

Discourse Analysis

Discourse analysis “is not only about method; it is also a perspective on the nature of language and its relationship to the central issues of the social sciences” (Wood & Kroger, 2000, p. x). This section outlines the process I used to conduct the discourse analysis of the data and to write the findings for this study. I have already described how discourse is understood in this research in Chapter Two (Theoretical Framework). I will now discuss how I employed the practice of discourse analysis to generate my findings and the methodological dilemmas I encountered.

The 13 interviews ranged from 10,000 and 20,000 words each and yielded a substantive amount of data. I felt slightly overwhelmed with this large amount of text, but was nevertheless determined to charge ahead, certain that I would be able to complete the analysis in a few short months if I dedicated a significant amount of time to the task. I was unaware at that point that the most challenging time of my academic career was about to begin, and that the process would last almost one full year. Although I attempt to explain the analysis step by step, my procedures were anything but linear, perfunctory, or straightforward. Instead, I would describe the analysis as a year-long, messy, complex, and often emotional endeavour. The process involved switching back and forth between listening to audio recordings and transcribing, re-reading transcripts, free writing, writing, re-writing, categorizing, chart-making, coding, discussing obstacles with my supervisor, Dr. Heather Sykes, and of course, much thought and reflection. The themes I cover in the Findings sections emerged in unpredictable ways.
Methodological dilemmas.

Before turning to a more formal explanation of the data analysis, I feel it is important to describe why I found the data analysis to be difficult on an emotional level. I cannot pretend that the anxiety I felt throughout the analysis was not an obstacle, and possibly even a limitation of this research. Throughout this analysis, I was concerned about making arguments that portrayed the participants in a negative light, especially those who exposed racism in the discourses. I began this project with the assumption that any discussion about the schooling exclusions of Aboriginal youth and their pathways to incarceration must include a race analysis. I also assumed that “good” people and “good” teachers are racist—including myself. This research also presupposed that educators, in their everyday work, do reinscribe the institutional and historical discourses that perpetuate inequality. Otherwise, this study would not have been necessary.

However, making these general assumptions was different from meeting participants face to face and affirming these assumptions through the analysis of their talk. Even though the objective of this research was never to simply point out racism, I was always afraid it would be interpreted as such, and that the more complex aspects of the research would be overshadowed.

I left all of the interviews with the feeling that, for the most part, my participants saw themselves as mostly un-implicated in inequality. Looking back, I realize they would not have chosen to participate if this was not the case. When participants did name inequality, they usually explained it as a problem being perpetuated by other teachers (more specific moments when this occurred are detailed in the Findings). These claims to innocence were very significant methodologically, as they often made me question the research project as a whole. I wondered, Have I been mistaken? Are schools today really devoid of racism? Halas’ (2011) experiences resonated with my own; she describes an instance of being publicly challenged on her work, one of the many instances that forced her to pause and question her own beliefs, “creating little
pockets of doubt that lingered in [her] own mind” (p. 9). After Halas had stated to a teacher at a workshop that “Aboriginal students want to succeed in school,” he aggressively challenged her by responding in a hostile tone, “What evidence do you have?...Those kids just don’t care about school” (p. 9). The situation made her wonder about the extent of the disconnect between her interviews with Aboriginal students and what teachers were perceiving. During the interviews I was never personally challenged in a hostile way, but I felt similar to Halas when I sensed a vast gap between my knowledge of racialized students’ experiences in school and the ways in which they were being described to me by some of the participants. At times I seriously doubted my own knowledge—after all, I had not taught in a classroom setting for several years, and most of my current knowledge stems from educational literature and conversations with others around me who are interested in similar issues. What could I really claim to “know”?

For example, at one point during my interview with Barb, after we had been discussing residential schools, I asked, “So, do you see schools as having a responsibility to work to repair some of that in terms of making school a different kind of place than it was for their grandparents?” to which Barb responded, “Well, oh my gosh, it is a different place. It is a different place!” Of course, I concede that for Barb, this is true. But again, I was troubled by the disconnect, and like Halas (2011), I questioned my own outsider knowledge since I did not have experience teaching in any of the participants’ schools. At play was not simply a lack of confidence, but a surfacing of my own “engrained colonial patterns of seeing and believing that freely circulate within and beneath my consciousness” (Halas, 2011, p. 3). I wondered if I was searching for problems that weren’t really there. Would the answers to under-education and over-incarceration be found by studying Aboriginal students and their families instead, and their “lack of commitment towards school” (Corrado & Cohen, 2004)? Deep down, I felt the answer to this question was no, yet such thoughts bubbled to the surface of my mind and then disappeared, only to reappear again throughout this research and ensuing analysis.
These doubts brought me to examine my own investment in the discourse of innocence and the upholding of whiteness. Why did I often feel compelled to affirm instead of expose certain discourses and not others, and to avoid those that were more troubling? Paula Butler (2005) discusses “shattering the comfort zone” in her anti-racist research on churches. “Because racism is inherently violent and ugly,” she argues, “the ‘race to innocence’ has to be at some point abandoned in favor of a deep, painful confrontation” (p. 129). This necessitated abandoning my own efforts to guard the innocence of teachers (and therefore myself) and taking the risk of naming racist discourses in my analysis. It also meant examining how my own positionality in relation to each participant shaped which excerpts I chose to include and which I refused to see as important. These are not issues that I was able to resolve completely; however, by acknowledging my own complicity in the kind of oppression I was analyzing, I was able to engage in the “troubling knowledge” of poststructuralism (Kumashiro, 2009). For example, it was very difficult to trouble discourses of empathy about residential schools and to claim that they were a form of paternal racism. Participants were genuine in their concern for what they perceived as the ongoing effects of residential schools in their students’ lives. I desired “ignorance and repetition” because it meant I would not have to experience the uncomfortable crisis of anti-oppression (Kumashiro, 2009). In sharing my apprehensions with my supervisor, she challenged me to think about whose interests I had in mind when I refused to see truth productions that were inherently racist. The answer, of course, was the interests of settlers. I illustrate these moments to underline the importance of paying close attention during one’s analysis to moments of affect, and for white researchers to consistently remind themselves that conducting research on whiteness is not a ticket to stand outside of it.
Analysis

I now turn to the more formal analytical procedures. I had planned on employing qualitative data procedures alongside discourse analysis—that is, following the seven steps of qualitative analysis as outlined by Marshall and Rossman (2006): 1) data organisation, 2) data immersion, 3) generating categories and themes, 4) data coding, 5) interpretations, 6) searching for alternative understandings, 7) presenting the findings in written format. However, as I began the analysis, I realized through trial and error that traditional methods of qualitative data analysis—in particular data coding—did not always lend themselves to the poststructural or discourse analysis approach of this study. In recognizing this, I also thought about the written comments on my proposal draft made by one of my committee members, Dr. Carol Schick, who reminded me that my objective was not to do a simple thematic analysis and describe what the participants said. I did understand what Carol meant by conducting a thematic analysis—in other words, I knew exactly what I was not supposed to do, and I fully understood why. But exactly how I would do otherwise remained to be learned, since describing discourse analysis—as I had done in my thesis proposal—is not the same as actually doing it. Grasping what it meant to really “think with theory” (Jackson & Mazzei, 2012) and to apply theory to data in order to generate meaning would be an ongoing process.

One of my first steps toward understanding discourse analysis was learning how to “see” discourses in the text. On my thesis proposal, Carol wrote about a very helpful method for seeing discourses in the data, and it is a method I used throughout the analysis:

One suggestion that I have for thinking about the discourse is to ask, “What does it want to be true?” Treat the discourse like a thing that is telling you something. What claims to truth is it making? In poststructuralism, of course, truth is a non-starter. But the utterances of participants will be offered as true against a background of the opposite that is
patently not true. This is why I suggest that you occasionally ask of the data: “What do you want to be true?” The data will tell you. (C. Schick, personal communication, January, 2013)

Rogers (2004) explains, “critical discourse analysis starts with the assumption that language use is always inevitably constructing and constructed by social, cultural, political and economic contexts” (p. 10). Rogers further states that analytical procedures for conducting discourse analysis depend on the research questions and situation, and that there are no formulas for conducting a discourse analysis. According to Wetherell and Potter (1992), discourse analysis is like riding a bike and cannot really be fully explained. Van den Berg, Wetherell, & Houtkoop-Steenstr (2003) maintain,

if they share nothing else, discourse analysts share their scepticism about simple reference or correspondence models of language: the notion that language neutrally describes a world of entities, whether those be external (policy developments, the state of play between groups) or internal (thoughts, attitudes, mental states). It is argued that the state of play, policies, groups, identities, and subjectivities are instead constituted as they are formulated in discourse. (p. 12)

In the paragraphs that follow, I attempted to achieve what Wetherell and Potter (1992) claim cannot be fully accomplished—an explanation of how I did a discourse analysis of my data.

The data analysis for this project began as I left each interview. In some cases I left feeling that I had collected important data, and sometimes I felt I had not. I often sensed intuitively that what participants had said would be important in my analysis, but in the early stages, I had yet to understand why. For example, I felt strongly that Valerie’s story about Jason, a First Nations boy who had gotten into a physical fight at school the day of the interview, was going to be important later on. Leaving Dante’s interview, I was troubled by his description of his students as coming to school with “a whole box of garbage” and his insistence that they brush
their teeth, yet it was not until later that I was able to name these as part of a larger chain of inferiorizing discourses about Aboriginal parents. In the initial interview stages, I made notes about what struck me as important so that I could return to the ideas later on. For example, in June 2013, I wrote the following:

Community schools offer students a wider range of programs that are based on needs different from academic needs. I am wondering how this is a repetition of a colonial discourse about parenting Aboriginal children? The school is almost taking the place of what they feel the family should be fulfilling. But in doing this, is it fulfilling its mandate of education? Why can’t it be both? Interesting—teachers do not say that the students need to be challenged academically, etc. Is it all premised on what teachers believe their parents are not doing at home? (Gebhard, notes for analysis)

My first formal step of the data analysis was to begin coding the data. I began coding the data through the identification of what was being accomplished or produced in the excerpts, as opposed to through a description of what each stretch of text contained. Therefore, discourse analysis was already taking place in the coding and organization. For example, in an excerpt where a participant discusses a disciplinary encounter with an Aboriginal student, instead of writing in the margin “disciplinary event” or “suspension,” I wrote what was being produced as true. This meant distinguishing what the participant produced as truth about herself from what she produced as truth about other teachers and students—or in other words, how she produced her own and others’ subjectivities. I transferred my notes in the margins into tables in order to examine what I had found. Below is a shortened table I completed during one of my first reads of Rock’s transcript. This table is an example of how I worked towards “seeing” the discourses in the text, and is by no means exemplary discourse analysis as it represents the beginning stages of my learning.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Discourse Analysis</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>What Rock produces as truth about himself—the subjectivities he produces.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Parents of Aboriginal students care and are interested in receiving test outlines.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- His students are no different academically or socially from those at his affluent school.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Not about lower expectations for diverse students but needs to be about differentiated expectations.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Supporter of Aboriginal students.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Supporter of Aboriginal content.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Aboriginal content for Aboriginal learners is important.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- It is not only Aboriginal students who experience poverty.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Important to incorporate a lot of Aboriginal content.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Students are capable of problem-solving and reflecting on misbehavior.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Aboriginal students are polite.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- All students need to learn empathy and problem solving skills.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
- Kids need to be engaged when it comes to their discipline and solving problems.
- Students need to be expected to have the same kinds of behaviours.
- It’s best to hide the fact one teaches in a community school (?) is a marker of improvement in our society.
- It is okay to talk down to the students.
- It is okay to yell at students.
- It is okay to shake a finger.
- No need to be respectful.

I completed approximately four transcripts by employing the above method—that is, aiming to identify what the participants were producing as truth, line-by-line. The process started to become arduous and I wondered if it was time to try a different approach. Although I was becoming skilled at “seeing” discourses and identifying ones that I felt were relevant to the research question, I questioned the need for a line-by-line analysis. At this point, I met with my supervisor and I explained to her what I had been doing. She asked me why it was that I felt compelled to analyze each transcript line by line, and what assumptions drove me to do so. Heather helped me to realize that I was being driven by very positivist notions about knowledge and data analysis. For example, I believed that meticulously combing through the data so as not to “miss anything” was a sign of academic rigour, and that by doing otherwise, it would be unfair to my participants. I further assumed that the interviews were representative of a whole, which would also assume an objective interview project that could collect knowledge representative of truth so long as all of the questions were posed. These assumptions were totally contrary to the poststructuralist stance on partiality and the incompleteness of knowledge. Regardless of how many excerpts I would eventually use in my findings, the interview data would remain “partial, incomplete, and always in a process of re-telling and remembering” (Jackson & Mazzei, 2012, p. ix).
Therefore, I changed my approach. I re-read each of the transcripts with my research questions in mind. I cut and pasted excerpts I believed had potential to answer the research questions, as well as those that I found compelling for other reasons. Heather suggested I pay close attention to the stretches of text that triggered emotional reactions in me as they had the potential to be important. I created a separate document entitled “Interesting excerpts” for each participant, though I had yet to determine what it was that made them interesting and potentially relevant. As a preliminary analysis, I continued to do free writing while I completed this step. I created a document called “Preliminary emerging themes,” which is excerpted here:

Teaching at a community school also means having to hide it?? Is it seen as “less important” work? Seems like there are several discourses about “community” schools. It is seen as really important work, but also really unimportant work?...

Discourse of support—so far, all the teachers are positioning themselves as supporters of Aboriginal students. This support is performed in different ways. Remember the point is not to determine whether they really are supporters or not supporters. But what does their positioning themselves as supporters accomplish? (Gebhard, notes for analysis, August 2013)

The data condensation was a key step that allowed me to move my analysis forward with a manageable amount of data. Through writing notes such as the one above, categories and themes started to emerge as I moved from one transcript to the next. I began to move excerpts from multiple teachers into categories. Some of my preliminary categories were the following: 1) Aboriginal students and their “anger”; 2) Constructing Aboriginal parents as incompetent; 3) Constructing the lives of Aboriginal students as containing nothing of value; 4) Culture as something students need, that can be taught, that will “help” them; 5) Anti-racism is non-normative and teachers pay the consequences for stepping outside of their role; 6) These kids are different; 7) Comparing Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students; 8) Community schools versus
non-community schools; 9) How participants are “different” from their colleagues; 10) Denial of racism; 11) Difficulty talking about racism; 12) Police officers in schools; 13) Students bringing cannabis to school; 14) Low academic and social expectations; 15) Frustrated by colleagues’ attitudes; 16) White students “getting away” with behavior; 17) Aboriginal males most likely to be in trouble.

I then began to re-read the excerpts in the categories and ask myself what was being accomplished through the participant talk. I re-focused on my research questions—specifically, what subjectivities and normative knowledges were being produced that legitimized the criminalization of Aboriginal youth—as opposed to focusing only on what I found interesting. The process of categorizing text into topics and discourses thus began to move back and forth. My categories changed as the excerpts became more about similar truth productions as opposed to similar topics of talk, a key distinction in discourse analysis. To be more precise, similar accomplishments and productions are often found when participants are discussing similar topics, but this is not always the case. Completely different truth productions and subject positionings often occur when participants are discussing similar topics, or vice-versa. For example, when discussing discipline approaches in their schools, numerous subject positionings were accomplished, including fearful and overworked teachers, unruly Aboriginal students, disrespectful Aboriginal students, respectful Aboriginal students, uncaring Aboriginal parents, nitpicking teachers, and lazy teachers. Therefore, as I continued to identify discourses in texts, I tried not to focus on the topics of teachers’ talk but on the accomplishments of their talk in order to establish the themes in the findings, and to ensure that my findings did not become the thematic analysis I was aiming to avoid. I thus sought to identify the key productions in the transcripts, those with “normative constitutions of schooling, students and learners” (Youdell, 2011, p. 88), that result in the exclusionary processes of Aboriginal youth from schools, and legitimizes criminalization.
Once I had established common truth productions, I collapsed and condensed categories once again. Some of these categories included: 1) Troublesome Aboriginal students, 2) Virtuous/heroic educators, 3) Neutral police officers/distrustful Aboriginal students, 4) Wounded parents. All of this was still preliminary. Once I had established themes for normative subjectivities and knowledges, I moved into the “real” work of emphasizing their consequences and social significance (Wetherell & Potter, 1992) as they relate to ongoing educational exclusions and the over-incarceration of Aboriginal youth. For example, I had identified across the transcripts that several participants produced Aboriginal students as distrustful of police officers and in need of relationship-building experiences with them. Writing about what this actually accomplished, and relating it specifically to my research questions, began the real work of my analysis. To do so, I paid close attention to how the discourses of interest constituted and positioned Aboriginal youth. I returned to my literature review and read new literature on policing and Aboriginal peoples. This enabled me to formulate my argument that the normative discourse of Aboriginal students as distrustful shifts the blame for their contact with police on to their shoulders; at the same time, it reproduces the law as a neutral and colourblind institution. This was directly germane to my research question. Not all of my arguments were straightforward in that I was able to directly relate normative discourses to criminalization, and I soon found that the discourses were far more exclusionary than actually criminalizing.

After several months of analysis and the writing of several chapters—many of which were re-written several times—I began to worry that I might have missed something important. I returned to several of my transcripts at this point, even though I had not planned on doing so. I ended up finding new excerpts that related to the new categories of analysis that had emerged towards the end of the analysis, but I did not generate new categories. The pulling together of all of the chapters and the full development of the central argument did not occur until shortly before this thesis went to the examiner. I finished the analysis when I intuitively felt as if I had taken
what I could from the data. However, because discourse analysis is always a partial endeavour and therefore incomplete, ending the analysis happened when I felt I had developed a strong argument as opposed to when I believed it was actually “complete.” The next three chapters of this thesis, are representative of the work I have detailed above, and the following section serves as an introduction to the findings.

**Introduction to the Findings**

In the following three chapters I turn my attention to the analysis of interviews conducted with 13 teachers and administrators in order to answer my research questions.

The discourses I showcase in the findings are not individual discourses. Borrowing from Comeau (2005b), “I understand participant talk as reflective of broader social conversations…as such conversations occur in [the Canadian prairies] and in Canada more generally” (p. 157). Specifically, these are broader conversations about Aboriginal over-incarceration, Aboriginal education, Aboriginal youth, and educational and social inequality faced by Aboriginal peoples. In understanding participants’ talk as authorized, limited, and reproductive by and of their social contexts,

[I] follow traditions of philosophers Foucault, Habermas and Lyotard, who argue discourse is made up of what is said—what is being talked about in terms of topics, themes and content—and how culturally established repertoires are put to use…and on the broader social and institutional conditions that make this possible. These conditions frame and, even more strongly, constrain who can say what is said, under what circumstances it can be said, and how it actually may have to be said so it will be communally validated. (Bamberg, De Fina, & Schiffrin, 2011, p. 11)

Through examples of “the endurance of particular official and popular discourses within school contexts,” I suggest that for Aboriginal students, “being made a subject in particular ways has
far reaching implications for education inclusion and exclusion” (Youdell, 2006a, p. 30). These implications are the effects of the productive, constitutive power of discourse: “This is a form of power that applies itself to immediate everyday life which categorizes the individual, marks him by his own individuality, attaches him to his own identity, imposes a law of truth on him…It is a form of power which makes individuals subjects” (Foucault, 1982, p. 781). By demonstrating how Aboriginal students are made into undesirable and inferior school subjects—and therefore impossible citizens—through contemporary iterations of colonial discourses, the following chapters underline how “discourse is intimately involved in the construction and maintenance of inequality” (Van den Berg et al., 2003, p. 13). Through examples of how participants counter colonial truth productions and reconstitute Aboriginal youth as bright and capable learners, I also demonstrate how “Foucault’s theories of power and discourse as producing realities, truths, and freedom make possible the idea that what is constructed can be deconstructed and contested” (Jackson, 2001, p. 392).

Throughout the findings, when referring to participants’ talk I employ the expression “to produce as truth,” which reflects the poststructural notion that “the criteria for truth (what counts as correct description) are negotiated as humans make meaning within language games and epistemic regimes…rather than guaranteed by access to the independent properties of a single external reality” (Van den Berg et al., 2003, p. 12). As such, my objective is not to prove or disprove participants’ descriptions, narratives, and explanations, but to uncover what their truth productions do, and specifically, how they position Aboriginal students and their teachers. In this way, I follow Foucault (1982) by questioning “the way in which knowledge circulates and functions, its relations to power. In short, the régime du savoir” (p. 781).

The subtitles are written throughout the findings in an imperative form or in the form of a statement, and in many of the subtitles I employ the term “them” to refer to Aboriginal students. I acknowledge that in doing so, I risk reifying difference and the persistent us/them dichotomy. I
have taken this risk for several reasons, the first being I believe it is important to point out the power imbalances in a racist, colonial society. Writing the subtitles throughout the findings in an imperative form or in a form of a statement, sometimes expressing a command, emphasizes that

The structures of colonialism contain rules by which colonial encounters occur and are “managed.” The different ways in which these encounters happen and are managed are different realizations of the underlying rules and codes which frame...what is possible and what is impossible. (Nandy, as cited in Smith, 2012, p. 8)

My objective is to name the underlying rules and codes of racial dominance and the racial knowledge in the context of this study that are all too often denied or obfuscated through rhetorical manoeuvres; while the subtitles are derived from participants’ excerpts, they are not participants’ direct quotations. Following Cannon (2012) I argue that “change must start by troubling...the interpersonal and institutional normalcy of things—the tendency to not name, know, or otherwise mark settler privilege” (p. 33). Further, the objective in underlining the us/them dichotomy throughout the findings is to demonstrate that educators do not lack racial knowledge (Leonardo, 2009a).

I also aim to highlight how educators resist, contest, and disrupt the intelligible teaching practices in their schools; that is, how they refuse these normative expectations to act in ways that disrupt racial dominance, and the new meanings that ensue through their resistance. Indeed, as educators enter the social institution of the school, they learn the different modes of operation within it, and the values they “they seek to maintain as true, natural or good” (Weedon, 1997, p. 3). They also accept, modify, or refuse these values, which simultaneously invoke specific subject positions for themselves and their students.

This approach also allows me to raise the question of agency and strategy (Wetherell & Potter, 1992, p. 93). That is, do I view the participants as “strategically using discourse or are discursive forms playing themselves out through the actions of individuals?” (Wetherell and
Potter, 1992, p. 93). Following Wetherell and Potter (1992), my position is “to have it both ways” (p. 93). While I do not concern myself with participants’ intentions, I do at times treat accounts as if they are designed to achieve strategic goals, for example the goal of positioning oneself as non-racist, or as a supporter of Aboriginal students. The dismissal of participants’ specific intentions, however, is derived from thinking through Foucault’s relations of power:

Foucault’s relations of power is not about seeking the inherent meanings of practices…We can never know people’s intentions, and intentions exceed subjects’ practices in terms of the effects. While practices may be planned and coordinated with aims and objectives, the overall effect may exceed any intention of the subject…Therefore practices take on significance not for their truth value or inherent meaning, but for the ways in which they disrupt or sustain relations of power and advance knowledge. (Jackson & Mazzei, 2012, p. 55)

In analyzing practices for the ways in which they disrupt or sustain relations of power, I am able to analyze what discourses do—specifically, how they are connected to educational exclusions and inclusions—as opposed to focusing on the participants’ intended effects.

The inclusion of racialized teachers in the study serves the goal of understanding how everyone is invited to participate in the colonial project. While the consequences for participating in racism differ for white and racialized peoples, everyone who participates is involved in the production of themselves as not-Other; the Other being in this context the abject Aboriginal person.

Said (1979; 1993) argues that this hierarchy of difference is constitutive of Western (modern) culture, which is and always has been predicated on an understanding of difference in which the ‘other’ (for him ‘the Oriental’; for us ‘the Aboriginal’) is not just different: s/he is also lesser (Anderson & Denis, 2011, p. 61, emphasis original).
In this way, I demonstrate how all participants, as they position Aboriginal students, simultaneously position themselves and are therefore engaged in identity-making processes. For the teachers in this study who self-identify as Métis (Robin, Melissa, Ryan and Valerie), and as First Nations (Danielle) or Aboriginal (Nicole), I argue their own backgrounds make them more likely to question the subjugating regimes of truth in their schools, although at times Aboriginal teachers cite colonial discourses as well. This underlines that the discourses are social and not individual in nature.

The subsequent chapters examine normative discourses that position Aboriginal students outside the bounds of acceptable student status and as non-citizens. I also present counter-discourses that trouble taken-for-granted knowledge about Aboriginal students and reconstitute them not only as learners, but also as full human beings with a range of desires and future possibilities, and whose lives are rich and valuable.

Chapter Five, *Culture is the only Answer*, argues cultural discourses are a form of “white racial knowledge” (Leonardo, 2009, p. 236) that preclude an understanding of over-discipline and racism as explanations for Aboriginal under-education, downplay other noteworthy forms of pedagogy, deflect responsibility on to Aboriginal students, and produce difference. As a power/knowledge relation (Foucault, 1980), I argue race power is deployed in discourses of culture as teachers control how Aboriginal students are known, distinguishing themselves as the (innocent) knowers (Leonardo, 2013). This chapter not only underlines just how pervasive cultural theories are—but also explores how they sustain relations of domination and schooling exclusions.

Chapter Six, *Inferiorizing Discourses and Schooling Exclusions*, explores a set of normative, inferiorizing assumptions about Aboriginal students, the schools they attend, and their parents and families. I argue the inferiorizing discourses are contemporary colonial iterations steeped in the historicity of nation-building—the discourses presented are part of a broader set
of discourses constructing Aboriginal peoples as devoid of the qualities and values of the nation—subject positionings that provoke anxiety, if not outright hostility (Thobani, 2007).

Chapter Seven, *(Threatening) Aboriginal Students and Discipline as Race Power*, builds the argument that normalized disciplinary practices of Aboriginal students, particularly Aboriginal male students, are forms of colonial domination that (re)produce them as lawless while educators are simultaneously produced as lawful. I present my argument through participants’ examples of the taken-for-grantedness of the over-discipline of Aboriginal students, as well as the normalization of a police presence in schools. This chapter points to the colonial dimensions of the taken-for-grantedness of racialized discipline. A race and gender analysis suggests the wider implication of the subjectivity of the troublesome Aboriginal student is the naturalization of the ejection of Aboriginal male students from the space of the school.
Chapter 5
Culture is the Only Answer

This chapter explores how culture discourses—understood as discourses that centre around the integration of traditional Aboriginal culture and history in schools as the solution to under-education and inequality—racialize Aboriginal students and allow for the dismissal of racism, while producing non-Aboriginal peoples as innocent and critically conscious. As a power/knowledge relation (Foucault, 1980), race power is deployed in discourses of culture as teachers control how Aboriginal students are known, distinguishing themselves as the knowers and producing subordinating knowledge (Leonardo, 2013). In the literature review I presented a critique of cultural theories for understanding the under-education of Aboriginal students (e.g., Schick, 2009; St. Denis, 2004). This chapter not only underlines just how pervasive culture theories are, but sheds further light on St. Denis’ (2004) assertion that the level of sacredness achieved by cultural analyses has meant “other analyses of the on-going marginalization, exclusion and oppression of Aboriginal people are not adequately explored” (p. 36). I argue culture discourses are a form of “white racial knowledge” (Leonardo, 2009, p. 236) that preclude an understanding of over-discipline and racism as explanations for Aboriginal under-education, downplay other noteworthy forms of pedagogy, deflect responsibility on to Aboriginal students, and produce difference. I demonstrate how participants employ culture talk to affirm a commitment to Aboriginal students and to evade considerations of racism in their schools. The last part of this chapter is concerned with how displays of cultural knowledge justify expressions of racism, and focuses on popular discourses about residential schools that position Aboriginal peoples as incapable parents.
It’s always a question of culture.

I begin with a long excerpt from Susan’s interview that contains several of my own questions and responses. Recall that Susan is a white woman with several years of teaching experience, but a new teacher in an inner-city school with predominantly Aboriginal students. I have chosen to include such a long excerpt because I argue Susan’s return to cultural explanations throughout demonstrates how Aboriginal student success and failure are produced as inseparable from discourses of culture, which simultaneously works to position the Aboriginal students as lacking and their teachers as the commonsensical void fillers. The excerpt is also demonstrative of how culture talk is a form of “white racial knowledge” (Leonardo, 2009, p. 236) deployed by teachers as a powerful tool that maintains innocence and avoids explicitly acknowledging race or racism.

Amanda: Okay. Can you talk to me about how improving educational outcomes for Aboriginal learners is a priority in your school—or is it a priority, do you think?

Susan: Well, I think it is a priority because we do try to do a lot of First Nations’ activities into our school, and to get First Nations into our school. So, like doing, like smudges, and the feast, and we started with um, what’s it called now? The circle of courage, and having Mushum and Kokum here and they would come to the classrooms and they would talk about the medicine wheel, and things like that…So I try to get as much First Nations and Aboriginal content in to my classroom as I can…

Amanda: And what do you think it means for the students to have that content? What do you think it means for the First Nations students?

Susan: I’m not quite sure that a lot of them are getting it. Like that they’re understanding that, hey this is my culture, because sometimes when we’re in the smudge and when we’re in feast, a lot of times it’s those behavioured First Nations that are acting up and they’re disrupting what they’re supposed to be respecting…

Amanda: And do you think that that is one way of improving success amongst learners? To integrate the [Aboriginal] content?

Susan: Um, you know I’m not sure about that.

Amanda: Do you think it makes them feel more connected to school?

Susan: For some of them, for some of them I think, possibly. The ones that really like, because, one little girl in my classroom is in the dancing (oh ok) so she wears the little um, outfits that have the bells or whatnot on it and she does her, her thing. And she
really has a really good grasp of her culture, and their traditions, and her parents talk lots about like the Mushum and Kokum and they read stories and, so she’s very knowledgeable about her background. Like with seeing that connection happening at school, it really makes her proud (Yeah, yeah)…

Amanda: How do you think that then educational outcomes can be improved amongst Aboriginal learners? Just because there are quite a few Aboriginal students who do end up not finishing high school, particularly in our province. So as a teacher, what recommendations do you have?

Susan: Well I think the first thing I think is that for myself, I need to have the knowledge to be able to teach what I’m supposed to teach, so even something as simple as the um, oh we’ve got to teach those courses on um, on Treaties. Well, I don’t have a really good understanding of Treaties, so for me to be able to get up there and teach it, I’ve got to know what I’m talking about. So I think with our education system, we need to start with our educators, to make sure that we know what we’re teaching. And for a lot of my, First Nations/Aboriginal content, it’s like, k, I don’t know the traditional games. I don’t know all this stuff that they want me to teach.

Amanda: But you’re coming back to, those—those kind of cultural add-ons. And before you said that you weren’t quite sure about those cultural teachings even being integral to like the success of the students. (Right) So what else do you think we can do?

Susan: I think even if we had more exposure for kids with elders, and um, possibly, I don’t want to say videos, but like, we need resources that will help us and help the students, and, and even parents.

The above excerpt demonstrates how the discourse of culture as the panacea for Aboriginal under-education forestalls conversations about Aboriginal student support that are about anything but the inclusion of Aboriginal content into the curriculum. Susan continues to fall back on cultural explanations even when I ask her what else teachers might do besides integrate culture, after she seems to question the effectiveness of the approach. I acknowledge, however, that I missed the opportunity to ask Susan more about teaching about the treaties, and that my response can also be interpreted as referring to the teaching of treaties as a “cultural add-on.” Susan’s interpretation of her responsibility to teach the treaties lies in the assumption that teaching about treaties is teaching about Aboriginal peoples, for Aboriginal peoples rather than

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10 Teachers are mandated by the Saskatchewan Ministry of Education to teach about Treaties at all grade levels. The Treaties represent the signing of agreements between the Government of Canada and First Nations people. Through the Treaties, Europeans and other immigrant groups acquired the right to settle in Canada and acquire land ceded by First Nations. For more information, visit: [http://esask.uregina.ca/entry/aboriginal_treaty_rights.html](http://esask.uregina.ca/entry/aboriginal_treaty_rights.html) and [http://www.education.gov.sk.ca/treaty-education/](http://www.education.gov.sk.ca/treaty-education/)
being a shared history; it is another aspect of what Susan refers to as First Nations/Aboriginal content.

The excerpt also sheds light on how “culture” is dominantly understood. Culture is produced by Susan as something that one can choose to engage with or not, a “‘thing’…something one can lose or regain” (St. Denis, 2004, p. 43). As Susan underlines, culture is the “stuff” that “they” want her to teach. It can be rejected, as in the case of the “behavioured First Nations” students who are disrespectful during cultural ceremonies, or embraced, as in the case of the little girl who wears her bells and does her “thing.” Susan’s description of her student who is “knowledgeable about her background” positions the student as an authentic actor of Aboriginal culture and therefore the “right kind” of Aboriginal student. This exemplifies St. Denis’ (2004) argument that “Cultural revitalization, acting as a system of true beliefs, depends on the construction of Aboriginality as a timeless, unchanging essence. It operates with a fixed notion of culture and a social stratification that regulates degrees of authenticity” (St. Denis, 2004, p. 41). Defining culture in this way ensures that the contemporary challenges faced by Aboriginal peoples are excluded from what constitutes “culture,” positions Aboriginal peoples as responsible for learning about “their” culture, and allows for non-Aboriginal peoples to reinscribe their dominance and superiority by taking on the arduous task of “helping” them to do so. When Aboriginal peoples refuse, they are produced as recalcitrant. Further, Susan’s excerpt exemplifies Schick’s (2014) argument that even when teachers do take up Aboriginal content in the classroom, it is most often “devoid of a political orientation” and delivered in a way that “completely ignores the effects of colonization and white privilege and the more challenging discussions about power relations and racism that have produced such unequal outcomes in Canadian society and especially on the prairies” (p. 90). Like many teachers, Susan takes up this task with “resistance” (Schick, 2014) through her display of difficulties in learning about the treaties and First Nations traditional games. At the same time,
Susan is careful to position herself as willing to learn, and in this way she can still remain a supporter of her students. This underlines Schick’s (2014) observation that “the little amount of [A]boriginal history and culture that finds its way into the schools is used in white discourses of resentment as evidence that equity has been achieved” (p. 100).

Because Susan produces the “cultural” content that she is mandated to incorporate as difficult and daunting, Aboriginal students can be produced as a problem for educators because their imagined “needs” are constructed as far more complex than those of non-Aboriginal students. Importantly, this also produces Aboriginal students as different; culture is named instead of race, but the effects are equally racializing. At the same time, these discourses are imbricated and circular; cultural discourses racialize students, and the racialization enables the culture discourses.

Even though Susan questions the effectiveness of the mandated inclusion of Aboriginal content into the curriculum, she produces this ineffectiveness as a problem belonging to Aboriginal students; that is, she positions the students as ungrateful and unable to recognize the importance of learning about “their” culture. The problem becomes, then, not only Aboriginal students’ lack of culture, but also their unwillingness to recognize their need for it and their ungratefulness towards those who try and provide it for them. Susan can therefore be the dutiful teacher determined to support her Aboriginal students by taking on the difficult endeavour of learning about treaties and traditional Aboriginal games, all for the sake of her Aboriginal students. And indeed, Susan’s echoing of what is mandated of her by the Ministry of Education does secure her positioning as a supporter of Aboriginal student success.

The following excerpt from Dante—recall that Dante is a Southeast Asian male who has been teaching for several years in a school with predominantly Aboriginal students—also illustrates the discourse of culture as belonging to the Aboriginal Other, and as distinct and identifiable. In this way, culture discourse again accomplishes the same work that race once
“it becomes a naturally occurring difference, a simple fact of life, and a self-sufficient form of explanation” (Wetherell & Potter, 1992, p. 137).

You have to get it, you have to get it, you have to get it from their culture too, with First Nations students, you have to get their culture, you have to understand it, if you don’t understand it and don’t get it and you come from a white picket fence you’re never gonna get it, and you’re never gonna understand them and they’re [not] gonna understand you.

In Dante’s insistence that his Aboriginal students possess a culture that educators are capable of knowing and understanding, so long as they are willing to invest the time and effort, Aboriginal students’ culture is not only produced as an obstacle, but it also reinforces Aboriginal students’ difference. Effectively, culture, and the students who “have it,” can become a burden for educators. Like Susan, Dante expresses that even though understanding Aboriginal culture is difficult, he is dedicated to overcoming the obstacle in the name of ensuring his students’ success. The excerpt also reflects what Wetherell and Potter (1992) call the “user-friendliness” of culture discourse; “unlike the racist, the cultural buff is understood as generous, progressive, committed to harmony and imbued with good-will” (Wetherell and Potter, 1992, p. 135). The subject positioning of the educator who commits to the cultural paradigm as generous and tolerant makes questioning these paradigms all the more difficult because identities are at stake.

It must be the (lack of) culture.

The next data excerpt is from Valerie, who self-identifies as Métis, and it underlines the power of cultural discourses to exclude alternative explanations for Aboriginal under-education and schooling exclusions. Despite providing numerous examples of a hostile environment towards the First Nations students in her school who are bused in from a nearby reserve, Valerie asserts that the lack of traditional Aboriginal cultural activities is the reason why the First Nations students do not feel a sense of belonging in her small-town school with predominantly white students. My point here is not to try and prove that Valerie secretly believes that the “real”
problem is racism, even though this may be a possibility, but to demonstrate how the discourse of
culture becomes a powerful racializing discourse when it erases the possibility for racism to be
acknowledged. As a Métis woman, Valerie is especially likely to experience a backlash from her
colleagues if she does suggest that the problems in her school are more related to racism than to a
lack of cultural activities. Even though her colleagues are resistant to Aboriginal cultural
activities as well, citing cultural discourses is far safer than suggesting racial discrimination, as
this would implicate the teachers. Valerie’s descriptions of her colleagues’ and the larger
community’s hostility towards the First Nations students in the school is telling of a social
context where racism is not supposed to be named.

Valerie talks at length throughout the interview about Jason, a First Nations student whom
she describes as frequently “in trouble” at school. At one point, Valerie describes her colleagues
at the school as “out to get him” when he is on the playground. Yet Valerie expresses the view
that Jason’s difficulties mainly stem from the lack of cultural activities offered by the school:

The teacher that had Jason last year, whenever you bring up his name he’ll say, “Oh, that
kid!” Just immediately that’s his response, or “Oh that Jason,” it’s always something
negative. He never—I’ve never heard him say one positive thing about that child that
was—and he was in his room for a whole year…In our school, okay, we have the
basketball team—was Jason going to join the basketball team? No, because of the other
boys that are in it are like church boys or, you know, they’re not his group. There’s
nothing really in our public school system in small town rural [name of province] that is
there for First Nations kids or for, or foster kids, really, First Nations foster I should say,
because there’s other foster kids that are part of that stuff. And [my colleague] was saying
like, last year I really tried hard to get the dancing program going, and the jigging and the
kids seemed to love it. But you know, nobody liked it well enough to continue with it,
nobody wanted to pay the money to bring their kids out to it, and she said, Jason just
loved it. Like he just thrived. He was our star dancer.

I am not questioning the dedication and the sincerity of the teachers in Valerie’s school who have
tried to integrate more Aboriginal content into the curriculum in order to foster Aboriginal
students’ connection to school. Nor am I arguing that cultural activities should not be brought into
the school, and I do contend that the resistance to these cultural activities by Valerie’s colleagues
is a form of racism. What interests me is that the discourse of culture as the panacea makes it
unsayable that Jason and other First Nations students struggle for reasons unrelated to a lack of cultural activities. While Valerie is also concerned that the First Nations students do not feel welcome on the sports teams, as these teams are made up of the “church” boys, to delve deeper into this issue would be to question the assumed inherent goodness of the school and raise the contentious topic of racial discrimination happening on the sports teams.

Barb produces the infusion of Aboriginal culture in her school as of utmost importance, and integral to Aboriginal student achievement. Unlike Susan, Barb does not produce Aboriginal cultural integration as a chore or demonstrate any resistance towards its inclusion; her attitude could be described as the very opposite. Throughout the interview, Barb describes how the integration of Aboriginal content into the curriculum is accomplished through activities and projects that are personally validating, compelling, and motivating for her students. When I ask Barb how her school is working to improve Aboriginal education, she responds with the following:

Well, I think our province as a whole, first off—it was great to see that Aboriginal culture must be in our curriculum. (mhm) Treaties must be taught first thing, because culture is important. Identifying with culture, the language, you know the food, the traditions, the—everything is really important.

Like Susan, Barb provides examples of the integration of cultural traditions in order to demonstrate a commitment to Aboriginal education. She goes on to talk about residential schools and treaty education, and I analyze this part of her answer in a subsequent section. Also similar to Susan, Barb produces treaty education as a part of “Aboriginal culture,” making it unlikely for the treaties to be perceived as a shared history that equally implicated non-Aboriginal peoples, who have flourished as a result (Schick, 2014). In discussing her educational philosophies, Barb also stresses several times throughout the interview that she views relationship building with her students and parent community as integral to her practice. It is therefore of interest that when specifically asked about improving Aboriginal student success, Barb names cultural integration
first, which demonstrates how educators’ turn to cultural explanations may obfuscate other important factors in schools that are contributing to Aboriginal student success. For example, in addition to Barb’s focus on relationship building, she also produces her Aboriginal students as bright and capable learners for whom expectations are set high, and she describes her commitment to building a school climate where students are treated with dignity and respect. Importantly, Barb’s descriptions of her practice also exemplify a troubling of traditional ways of “doing school” that can prevent students from being learners—for example, in a later excerpt Barb discusses her belief in the need to be flexible with the typical four-year completion time for high school students, and she names structural barriers such as transportation commonly faced by Aboriginal students, thereby rejecting individualizing imperatives for understanding attendance.

If Barb were to evoke the latter examples of inclusive pedagogy, rethinking of traditional school norms, and the reconstitution of her Aboriginal students as learners, it would be possible to consider that while Aboriginal students benefit from a culturally relevant curriculum, they also have the same needs as non-Aboriginal students in order to flourish in school. However, for Barb to name, for example, the production of her Aboriginal students as bright learners, and her philosophy of “There’s not an option of failing” as the reason for her students’ success, this would mean questioning the assumption that Aboriginal students are held to the same high standards and treated with dignity in every school.

When I ask Barb whether the teachers in her school directly address the issue of racism with students, Barb understands this as largely being about the infusion of Aboriginal culture and history into the curriculum, and teaching of the treaties. As demonstrated in the following excerpt, Barb produces racism as a problem belonging to individuals, reifying dominant society’s construct of racism as something that consists of “individual acts of meanness committed by a few bad people” (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2012, p. 102).

Amanda: Can you tell me about how you feel that racism affects Aboriginal youth at school? (At school?) And it might not be in your own specific school, but in general.
Barb: Oh no, I think it’s still—it affects everybody. And definitely it affects Aboriginal kids in how they experience it, and how they value themselves. And how they, how they, yeah, how they value themselves. If you think you are a second-class citizen, and if you are treated like that, you are. And, in terms of valuing yourself, definitely racism is something that is still prevalent, and still affects our youth in a terrible way. I don’t know how you—I mean, in a school, you talk about it, bring it to the forefront, you, it’s something that a child learns, right? It’s not something that anyone’s born with, or any, anything like that. But you still—it’s an issue for sure.

Amanda: Do any of the teachers do you think talk to the students about racism?

Barb: Oh, for sure. For sure. Yes, yeah. Every—it’s part of everyday life. Not only the health curriculum, but it’s a value. And we have, actually, our school is pretty good in that way. There is the odd issue that will come up, but it’s an oddity, which is kind of nice. The same way that bullying would come up, or you know, once in a, once in a while, but generally this is one school that I’ve been, worked at, had the privilege of working at where as a whole—I don’t know whether it’s because it’s a rural school too. I don’t know. But it’s very understanding of peoples’—it doesn’t matter… or here’s something that they think this, you know, it’s the best thing that they did was to come here.

And plus, the expectations, you are expected—you are expected here to achieve. Because we believe you can achieve. And you’re expected to be a nice guy. And be respectful, and treat people with dignity…And in terms of teachers, yes, we address it all the time, and we teach Treaties in four different grades. Every day—or every curriculum, in every year. Kids know the treaties by the time they get to grade eight should know a great deal of information and background on the treaties, and the treaty rights, and treaty education. And also, you know, stories where you see Aboriginal characters, and you have guests that are Aboriginal authors or Aboriginal artists, are telling Aboriginal stories, or legends that come from all the oral tradition of years ago, and keep that alive, and so yeah, elders.

Barb’s avoidance of using the term racism—she uses the word in the beginning of her answer and then avoids explicitly naming race or racism as she continues to speak, choosing to say “it”—is important, because it is telling of a social context where the term evokes discomfort. And indeed, by the end of her answer, Barb turns back to a discussion of cultural traditions, a far more comfortable topic. In the first part of her answer, racism is produced as being experienced by Aboriginal students, but no perpetrators are named—for example, Barb does not name who is treating Aboriginal students as second-class citizens, which forecloses discussions on how and why the devaluation of one’s self occurs. However, I recognize that Barb’s answer could very well be due to my own question—How does racism affect Aboriginal students?—as this question
focuses on racism as an experience as opposed to something that is instigated and controlled by non-Aboriginal peoples. Therefore, I also see myself as not only a participant in the same discourses about racism, but as the instigator. I may instead have asked, “How do non-Aboriginal peoples practice racism in schools?” Nevertheless, when racism is produced as being only about low self-esteem, and there are no other actors involved, it is possible to see why cultural validation is imagined as a suitable solution. Although I am not arguing that an emphasis on the cultural curriculum is problematic in itself, and I surmise that it is meaningful for many students, the pervasiveness of the discourse of culture as panacea allows educators to not only avoid uncomfortable discussions about racism, but also to reify the assumed neutrality of the school. While validation and recognition of Aboriginal students’ rich cultural backgrounds and history is a part of addressing racism, it is insufficient if it does not directly name racism and power imbalances.

Barb also mentions setting high expectations for her students as part of her answer. Her assertion that “You are expected here to achieve. Because we believe you can achieve” is salient, because such a statement can only makes sense if elsewhere, Aboriginal students are not always expected to achieve. Also note Barb’s assertion that many of students believe “the best thing they ever did” was come to her school. And yet Barb does not explicitly acknowledge that, as a rural school where Aboriginal students are valued, affirmed, and treated with dignity, her school may indeed be a unique space within her geographical context. Recall that Valerie describes her own rural school very differently. It is interesting that Barb does not consider her discourses about Aboriginal students as bright students with promising futures are counter discourses, or grapple with the possibility that her students may face racial discrimination in different schools.
It doesn’t happen here.

Recall that Jasmine is of South Asian descent and works in an inner-city school with predominantly Aboriginal students. Jasmine also frames racism as manifesting through individual acts, and the next excerpt further evidences how the emphasis on cultural integration as a solution for Aboriginal under-education means that addressing racism is about providing more or better cultural content. Jasmine also names the substantial focus on Aboriginal cultural activities in her school as evidence that Aboriginal students do not experience racism. She acknowledges that racism likely happens outside of school, but does not believe it happens inside her own school walls. When I ask Jasmine whether racism affects Aboriginal students, she responds:

You know possibly, I’m sure it does. Like I can’t see it happening—even here I think—it won’t be racism, but I think it’s more—lots of bullying does happen. You know, even amongst Aboriginal kids and so at this school, I wouldn’t say racism because we don’t have too many of any other culture, like this is predominantly First Nations. But in other schools I’m sure it does, you know like for in every other race. Racism does exist you know, and even at our school some of our African kids have struggled. Like First Nations kids have called them names and called the Chinese students some names (hmm). So it does exist, but like specifically at this school, I wouldn’t say that racism is one of the reasons that the kids would not be at school, because you know just because of like the demographics here. This is their school and you know we follow First Nations culture. So it’s a very welcoming place for them. It’s a place—we want them to feel like they belong.

Even though Jasmine produces as truth that other racialized students, such as the African and Chinese students, do experience racism in school, she employs cultural discourses as evidence that the Aboriginal students do not. Lawrence and Dua (2011) have underlined that Indigenous peoples have not been “seen as intrinsic to understanding race and racism” while “Canadian history is replete with white settler racism against immigrants of colour” (p. 23). The above excerpt suggests that while Aboriginal peoples continue to be ignored within anti-racist frameworks, they are also produced as being against immigrants of colour. This excerpt also reinscribes the discourse that any group who racially discriminates against another do not experience racism themselves. Because of Jasmine’s understanding of racism as individual—while for the African and Chinese students, she sees evidence of racism (name-calling by First
Nations students) —the large population of First Nations students in the school, and the following of Aboriginal culture serve as evidence that the First Nations students are welcomed and must feel a sense of belonging. The discourse that in classrooms and schools where there is an effort to include Aboriginal culture there cannot be racism is a salient example of St. Denis’ (2004) assertion that cultural analyses’ have assumed a level of sacredness to the point that they “help to keep racial domination intact” (p. 37). Equity is achieved for Aboriginal students as long as the right amount of culture is provided.

Lana and Melissa, like Jasmine and Barb, also produce racism as something that exists but not in their schools. They affirm this absence of racism by noting either the predominant Aboriginal population or the absence of an Aboriginal population. Lana, who is white, can affirm this truth by underlining that her teaching situations have either been with young students, predominantly First Nations students, or predominantly white students—all contexts in which she imagines the occurrence of racism as impossible. In this way, racism is about numbers and also about age. Note that in the following two excerpts, both Lana and Melissa avoid using the term “racism.”

Um (.) No. I haven’t [racism]. I don’t think that I have—I’m not saying that it’s not there. I’m usually dealing, in the last few years, with very young kids. Um, and when I taught in older grades I was at band-controlled school. Or I was at Orange School, where it was pretty much all white kids, so you know, I never—never saw it there.

Melissa, who is Métis, also alludes to the possibility of racism occurring in other schools, but believes that in her own school it does not affect the students because she teaches in a rural school, and also because the majority of her students are of Aboriginal descent:

If I would have taught at more schools I would say that it could be a possibility [racism] because I live in you know, in a city . . . I think it could play a part certainly in, in school, for First Nations and Métis, kids but I would say in our school it’s not really happening.

For Susan, racism is also not something she has “seen,” which continues to produce racism as a set of individual acts.
Not what I’ve seen or experienced so far at this school. I don’t see a lot of racism and just hurtful things being said and done. I don’t see that here.

Thus far, participants’ answers to my questions about racism all suggest they believe that I am asking about racism as it occurs amongst students, specifically through their individual acts. The participants in this section do not seem to consider that I might be asking about the racism perpetuated by educators, or about institutional racism. Both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal teachers, in the excerpts I have thus far presented, deny the existence of racism inside of school. Later in the findings, I present contradictory discourses. There are different implications and motivating factors for the non-Aboriginal person versus the Aboriginal person who names or does not name racism—and both have racializing consequences (Pollock, 2004). As underlined by Sensoy and DiAngelo (2012), people of color may “be invested in denying racism for a range of complex reasons” (p. 103). One reason for any of the participants’ denial of racism could be their understanding of racism as individual and random acts. Yet in the next excerpt by Valerie, this is not the case, and as I will show in later chapters, Ryan is also fearful of naming racism. While “all Whites benefit from racial actions whether or not they commit them and despite the fact they may work against them” (Leonardo, 2009, p. 234), the Aboriginal person who chooses not to discuss racism could likely be aiming to prevent a racist backlash. And, if Aboriginal persons do name racism, they are not fulfilling a condition of acceptance into the majority group—that they deny racism like their white counterparts.

The reluctance to name racism by Aboriginal teachers deserves more analysis, in consideration of the topic of this dissertation. Valerie was the only participant who discussed her personal experiences of racial discrimination in her school during the interview; at one point after Valerie shares numerous stories of racial discrimination against students, she explained that her reluctance to call out racism stems from her own experiences of discrimination in the community.

The things that I experienced in this community have made me a little bit jaded and so maybe sometimes my interpretation of what goes on at school is biased the other way, like you were saying why are you reluctant to say it’s racism and stuff, is that I guess
I’m afraid of being biased that way and saying well actually, you know, jumping on the racist train.

Valerie’s concern that her personal experiences of racism will produce her as “biased,” as opposed to a valued speaker on the topic of race, is telling of a social context where race power deployed by whites can have the effect of Aboriginal peoples believing their own knowledge about race, garnered from their first-hand experiences, is illegitimate. Valerie’s experiences with racism, as well as her feelings of self-doubt, are consonant with findings from St. Denis’ (2010) research, which also demonstrated Aboriginal teachers contend with lowered expectations for Aboriginal students, the framing of Aboriginal content and perspectives as trivial and intrusive, and a silence and denial about race and racism. It is likely that Valerie is aware that her own conformity with the denial of racism is a necessary condition of her (precarious) acceptance and assimilation into the majority group.

There is also the question of the assumed innocence of the space of the school. Talking about anti-Aboriginal racism in the Canadian prairies, as it occurs in a space believed to be colourblind, evokes formidable anxiety. Aside from Nicole and Rock, whose excerpts will be introduced later, participants are hesitant to name racism outright as something that happens in their schools. For the most part participants do name racism as it happens outside of the school; again, this secures their own non-complicity, but it also demonstrates that talk of racism is acceptable if it involves other spaces and other people. This again is a form of Leonardo’s (2009) “white racial knowledge”; whites know how and when to talk about racism when there is no tension. Aboriginal peoples also learn whites’ codes of conduct for talking about race (or not), but follow these codes for very different reasons than do whites.

The final excerpt in this section is from Nicole, who self-identifies as Aboriginal and who disrupts cultural discourses and problematizes cultural activities as a solution for under-education. She underlines the irony of cultural activities as a solution to under-education and
maintains that racism is the problem—a problem that cannot be remedied through cultural teachings:

I really think it’s just everything boils down to, to *racism for me*…As far as like under education of Aboriginal kids, all of it boils down to anti-racist education for me. I think that would help, for teachers to start recognizing the racial other in our city and how problematic that is. Like if teachers taught through that point of view rather than trying to say, let’s make dream catchers today, like let’s make like a little drum and then we’ll make a little drum and cover it with leather—the little tuna can drum…like so we have all these Band-Aid attempts and they’ve spent millions of dollars on, on this like Treaty Catalyst and the Office of the Treaty Commissioner put in like tons of money into trying to get all teachers (yeah) to kind of teach about the treaties but at the same time to me that’s a band-aid solution when you don’t recognize this group that’s completely oppressed as the racial other…

Nicole names examples of why Aboriginal students might not be succeeding in school that have nothing to do with cultural integration:

I think it’s just that the kids don’t feel comfortable or that there’s a place for them or when they get to school. When they get to school, that they find that they’re just not welcome, right, because then they get to, so even if they come to our school or whatever and they’re five minutes late or who knows, and they get locked out.

In the first excerpt, Nicole underlines the futility of allocating large funds to what she sees as misguided solutions. She also supports Schick’s (2014) assertion that when Aboriginal culture is taken up by teachers, it is not an anti-oppressive practice. Nicole’s example of students being locked out “because they are five minutes late” has absolutely nothing to do with cultural activities or even curriculum content, but speaks to the undignified way that discipline is handled in her school. By highlighting this particular story about students being locked out, Nicole tells a different version of the story of why it is that Aboriginal students do not feel welcome at school. In the social context of this study, this is not a popular version of the story, as it is about the culpability of teachers, not the culpability of Aboriginal students or their need for cultural activities. This last excerpt is also supportive of my earlier argument that more attention needs to be paid to practices in schools where Aboriginal students experience success, that are not necessarily related to the incorporation of culture, but to the reconstitution of Aboriginal students.
as learners who belong and who *matter*, through dignified treatment and high expectations. In order for this to happen, there must be a willingness on the part of non-Aboriginal teachers to engage in an uncomfortable reflexivity about the ongoing mistreatment of Aboriginal students in school.

**That was in the past.**

This next section is concerned with how settler innocence and Aboriginal culpability are produced through popular discourses about residential schools that position settlers as empathetic and Aboriginal peoples as wounded and deficient. The analysis suggests that participants often make sense of inequality in the lives of their students—including contact with the justice system—and the need to remedy the inequality by citing the residential school system. I consider popular discourses about residential schools “culture talk” because they often centre on the “loss” of Aboriginal traditional culture. Present inequality can therefore be understood as stemming from past racial injuries, as opposed to current and ongoing wounding. Of course, Aboriginal cultural traditions were never “lost,” but were “shamed, beaten, and tortured” out of Aboriginal peoples (Moran, as cited in St. Denis, 2007, p. 1072). The research of Wetherell and Potter (1992) from over 20 years ago in the white settler colonial nation of New Zealand, connects “lost” culture discourses with the construction of criminality:

Culture becomes offered as a form of treatment for delinquent and dispossessed individuals and communities. Modern urban Maoris are presented as lost and aimless, searching for meaning and structure in their lives, and, in the absence of these things, prone to crime and disorder. In a curious way modern Maoris become positioned as non-persons. If you ‘carelessly’ lose your culture and identity, really all you can become in this discourse is an empty vessel, waiting to be refilled. (p. 131)
As I conducted this analysis, I started noticing how citing historical knowledge about residential schools was working to position educators as blameless and allowing racism to be relegated to the past. At the same time, I was perturbed by similar comments being made by my pre-service teacher university students during what were meant to be progressive conversations about residential schools. Statements along the lines of, “Teachers need to understand that because of residential schools, Aboriginal peoples don’t know how to be parents,” were commonplace. I began thinking about how displays of historical knowledge were used to justify expressions of racism and re-inscribe oppressive settler-Aboriginal relationships. I argue these are the consequences of an educational discourse about residential schools that produces Aboriginal peoples as wounded, downtrodden, and in need of healing and interventions. This section also introduces the discourse of incapable Aboriginal parents, which I return to throughout the findings, and is central to the larger argument of this thesis relating to the constitution of Aboriginal peoples as devoid of the qualities of the nation.

The following series of excerpts demonstrate how participants are positioned as critically conscious through expressions of sympathy, and conversely, how Aboriginal peoples are positioned as wounded and downtrodden, and therefore likely to commit crime or to fail in school. The story is one in which participants can assume positions of innocence because the present trauma is assumed to have been caused by past perpetrators.

Jasmine, Ryan and Rock respond to why high numbers of Aboriginal students come into contact with the justice system, beginning with Jasmine:

I think circumstances form and also you know, it’s generational. The abuse that they’ve had to, you know, the residential schools, and addictions, like they don’t have a very stable family. So I feel that’s the main reason. Like the kids, Aboriginal kids who get in trouble would be the ones who don’t have a very strong family. Like parents are not, there’s not supervision, there’s no—it’s just not a solid family…

Grades four and grades five sometimes, you know when you talk to them, they’re out at ten, ten-thirty, their parents won’t even know that they’re out…So and maybe, because the parents, because addictions maybe. Drugs and alcohol involved. And also I’m sure, and I know for sure that there are lots of our kids that have been abused. Sexually. And
we know, you know for them to feel, there’s no self-worth, and they go out and do things to I don’t know to hurt other people maybe because they’ve been hurt. I think just the pain that they’ve gone through. It’s going to take a lot of years for them to heal. It’s generational. (hm). Like I think residential schools have had a big part, have played a big role in you know kind of for First Nations people to feel and behave the way they do now. Like I think addictions is the main reason. So. (Okay). And poverty too.

Jasmine produces contact with the justice system as an individual problem of low self-esteem and abusive parenting skills, both of which originated in the residential school system. “First Nations people feel and behave the way they do now” calls up an unspoken list of inappropriate behaviour belonging to Aboriginal peoples, and I argue it is Jasmine’s citing of residential schools that allows her to make such a statement. In relegating all social issues today to the past, Jasmine can only have one role, which is to help and support Aboriginal peoples on their healing journey. There can effectively be no analysis of the ongoing racism, colonialism, and continued processes of mistreatment by settler society on the lives of Aboriginal students.

In the next excerpt, Ryan also cites residential schools in order to make sense of why Aboriginal peoples come into contact with the justice system. He also references the familiar theme of the difficulty of being a good parent when one’s family has experienced residential schools. The connections Ryan makes, like other participants in this chapter, connect “good” parenting and “strong” families to school success and upward mobility. Like Jasmine who says that “it’s generational,” Ryan says that “it’s cyclical.” In both cases, “it” refers to the unnamed pathologies that Aboriginal parents pass down to their children.

I think the history of residential schools and that explicit violence and cultural damage makes it (inaudible) for people who have been in residential schools away from your parents for a significant amount of time and facing violence and abuse. It’s really hard to be a good parent, like a healthy parent, because you haven’t had experience, and you’ve been hurt, and the ripple effects of it’s, it gets cyclical unfortunately where abuse is perhaps repeated at times. You know, like addiction can come into factor as a coping mechanism, like the social support for healing may not be there and, and I’m saying it in general, I’m saying this in general. I was just actually just thinking of my own family, but that—that’s what all our teachers say.

As I will demonstrate later on, Ryan does bring up other factors when he discusses social
inequality faced by Aboriginal peoples; in particular, he speaks at length about the substandard treatment of Aboriginal students in school. In the above excerpt, Ryan aims to construct a response to a question he is not often posed—a question about the justice system. While he—like Nicole, Rock, Susan and Valerie—mentions that he has little knowledge about the justice system and does not feel authorized to speak about it, it is significant that he, like other participants, brings up the residential school system in his attempt at constructing an answer. As Ryan explains, “that’s what all our teachers say,” suggesting he has had little access or exposure to alternative discourses. Such a response also suggests that Aboriginal peoples are in the “healing” stage and are dealing with the inter-generational effects of racism as opposed to the active, ongoing, every-day wounding.

Jo responds to the request of a description of her students and her school:

My perception is that because their parents or their grandparents or their guardians are struggling with living day to day, and meeting their basic needs, and probably also struggling with the effects of their families having experienced residential schools, they perhaps don’t have the parenting skills, or are worried about living day to day rather than supporting their children at home with things like take home reading, or any kind of work that would be associated with school…Or even having the time to be able to read with their children. So the effects of poverty, well that’s interrelated, I think, with the struggle with addictions, and so our children are experiencing challenges associated with parents who are struggling with addictions who are doing their best, but they’re struggling with addictions.

Jo believes a large number of her students are living in families where there is poverty and addictions. Naming residential schools makes it possible for Jo to cite the discourse of Aboriginal parents’ lack of involvement in their children’s education, as well the discourse of a lack of parenting skills. Jo is conscious that her comments about parents could be taken as racist or discriminatory, and she is careful to point out, after saying that the parents in her previous school valued education, that the parents in her current school do also value education: “I’m not saying that the parents at Orange School do not value education. They do. I know they do… Um, if they’re worrying about things other than having conversations with their children about the
importance of education, even though they feel education is important, that’s not necessarily communicated to the students.” Jo’s discursive move ensures her own positioning as a supporter of Aboriginal youth and their parents, whom she produces as struggling to communicate the importance of education to their children.

Recall that earlier, I analyzed the first part of Barb’s answer to my question of how schools work to address Aboriginal under-education, in which Barb discusses the importance of the incorporation of culture. The excerpt below is the continuation of Barb’s answer. Here, Barb displays knowledge about residential schools and the Indian Act, producing as truth that this knowledge is evidence of a commitment to address under-education.

And, there’s two things that I feel severely impacted our Aboriginal kids, and that’s residential schools, and the Indian Act. I don’t—and I think those are two significant things in our country’s history, and definitely our own Aboriginal kids in terms of their education. Residential schools, I mean I think your research will tell you that it was—children did not grow up in a family. So they don’t know what a family is. And I think because of that, because of the horrific things that happen, we all know that—the loss of culture, the loss of a language, which is the, I mean, the loss of—terrible things. And having to cope with that loss of, of a lot of issues for families that are not that far, that are not that far removed from us. We’re talking grandparents (mhm). So, I think, is it a bigger issue than education—absolutely it is. This is about family, and that’s—family and education are absolute partners, and some families of Aboriginal youth, the residential schools have been a horrible, horrible price for that family.

Barb’s display of knowledge about the residential school system and the Indian Act secures her position as well-intentioned and critically conscious. Barb produces the residential schools as severely impacting the students in her school, especially in terms of their current family lives. While I do not disagree that the residential schools have been devastating for Aboriginal peoples, of interest to me is how this devastation is transformed into devaluative narratives about Aboriginal families, which are salient when considered within a colonial project. In a country where families have been “exalted as the bedrock of the nation” Aboriginal families continue to be “constituted as a threat to national advancement” (Thobani, 2007, p. 197) through discourses such as “They don’t know what a family is.” Problematizing such statements is difficult, because
while they subjectivate Aboriginal peoples in negative ways, they are also claims to sympathy and understanding. Cowlishaw (2003) helps make sense of the difficulty in problematizing claims to sympathy on the part of educators: “It may seem perverse to suggest that the national goodwill is itself a source of problems for Aboriginal peoples. But claims to sympathy and recognition can entail misrecognition and authoritarian solutions” (p. 109). Expressions of empathy for residential school survivors can actually serve to justify public expressions of racism, pointing to who actually benefits from the production of empathy (Boler, 1997). Barb expresses surprise when I ask her whether schools today should be responsible for making sure that they are different from the residential schools of the past:

Well, oh my gosh, it is a different place (Yeah, so tell me more about that). It is a different place! You have to reach out to that a little bit too, and build that, I mean, everything is about communication and trust and building relationship in a school, and when you can do that, it can be really successful.

First, I do not doubt that Barb’s school is indeed a very different place from church-run residential schools. While Barb may only be referring to her own school in the above excerpt, I am interested in troubling the version of truth that all schools today are devoid of their oppressive past elements because residential schools are now closed. This version of truth means that if there is a problem, it is likely to belong to Aboriginal peoples who are in need of rebuilding their trust in schools, as opposed to belonging to an education system that must continue to examine exclusionary practices. The popular discourse of Aboriginal peoples taken for granted distrust of the school system also requires unpacking. If Aboriginal parents today are distrustful of the school system, there are likely a multitude of reasons for this that do not stem solely from residential school experiences. In a subsequent chapter, I demonstrate how Aboriginal parents’ distrust of the school system is a highly racializing discourse in that it not only produces innocent educators but also justifies substandard educational practices on the basis that Aboriginal parents do not care.
Dante also employs residential school discourses and the ideology of individualism as evidence that racism is currently a non-factor in the lives of his students. Individualism as an ideology “claims that there are no intrinsic barriers to individual success, and that failure is not a consequence of social structures, but of individual character” (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2012, p. 103).

I mean if I was a First Nations student and I had a negative experience, I hope I wouldn’t say it’s because of the colour of my skin. And we all got choices to make, but you know a lot of it, like I don’t know, that’s a tough—I mean residential schools are gone, right, they weren’t working. I know some students that did very well with residential schools, like adults that I talked to and, and then some of the hardships that happened there…I don’t know it’s, I mean, it’s sad that people have to deal with that, but we tried our best. I mean it depends, that’s a tough question. I haven’t dealt with a lot of racism to be honest, but I’m not Caucasian, I mean I’m not—so I’ve been very fortunate. But it’s how I conduct myself though, too. I mean I try not to discriminate. The students that are, that feel discriminated, we try to help them. I mean I try to help them. I’m totally against it, discrimination.

Dante struggles to answer my question of how he feels racism is a factor in the schooling experiences of his Aboriginal students. He produces racism as something that happened during the residential school era, and therefore over. He repeats several times that I have posed a “tough” question, suggesting that racism is not something he is accustomed to speaking about. He cites the discourse of personal responsibility to deny that racism is a factor in the lives of his students, and offers his own experiences as a racialized person to disavow racism as a factor in the lives of his Aboriginal students. He also produces racial discrimination as something that is brought on by the racialized person, who chooses to conduct himself/herself in a certain way. As underlined by Sensoy and DiAngelo (2012), racialized people, among other reasons, may be invested in denying racism if they themselves have been successful in mainstream society, and feel that more hard work is needed on the part of other minoritized groups. I acknowledge Dante’s discomfort is also likely partially stemming from my own positionality as a white woman, and his positionality as a racialized man; denying racism may also be a mechanism for coping with its overwhelming dynamics (Sensoy and DiAngelo, 2012).
The difficulty in analyzing culture talk about residential schools is the risk of downplaying the devastation they caused. I recognize the Aboriginal students in participants’ schools are indeed living with the effects of past and ongoing forms of colonization, which affect students in varying ways and are context specific. These effects likely include poverty, addictions, violence, abuse, and racism. Despite these very real and devastating consequences, my objective here is not to study these consequences per se, nor is it to validate or refute the claims the educators make about the realities of their students’ lives. Instead, I am interested in troubling how these consequences become framed as collective deficiencies, allowing for non-Aboriginal peoples to assume the role of the innocent do-gooder who is only there in order to “help.” While there is a discourse of a collective pathology or discourse, there is also a discourse produced for the individual “good” teacher. During the residential school era, Aboriginal children were made into subjects in need of salvation due to their uncivilized and degenerate home lives; today, Aboriginal children remain subjects in need of salvation from the uncivilized and degenerate home lives brought on by the residential schools. In order to disrupt this discourse, knowledge about residential schools must be produced that reconstitute, instead of reinscribe, the colonial subjectivities of heroic, rational and centred settlers and troubled and downtrodden Aboriginal peoples.

Conclusions, Consequences, and Contradictions

This chapter has set the stage for the remainder of this thesis by telling the enduring “standard story” of Aboriginal education. Culture discourses are a key way of knowing Aboriginal education in the Canadian prairies, and a commitment to Aboriginal education is synonymous with a commitment to the integration of Aboriginal content in schools. The discourses in this chapter are not individual but social; teachers are citing discourses that are duly
repeated at every level of schooling in the prairies (Schick, 2009). Teachers can come to know themselves as “good” teachers of Aboriginal students through these discourses, and this is largely because cultural discourses are also nationalist discourses—“respect for diversity and cultural pluralism [are] emblematic of the Canadian national character” (Thobani, 2007, p. 237).

According to Schick (2009), “the pedagogy of culturalism is not restricted to education processes…but is well rehearsed in the national narrative in which the ‘celebration of culture’ is synonymous with being a good Canadian” (p. 114).

At the outset of this research I wondered why there is a paucity of research on school and prison connections for Aboriginal students. I now argue this is a result of the pervasiveness of cultural theories, which make this type of research unthinkable. Examining the discourses that foreclose and open up the possibility for research on this topic is therefore germane to what makes the criminalization of Aboriginal students possible. It is not the integration of Aboriginal culture in itself that can be linked to the criminalization of Aboriginal peoples, but the racializing effects of the cultural discourses. Cultural theories are so embedded in what counts as important knowledge about Aboriginal education that the possibility of examining the criminalization of Aboriginal students, or their over-discipline, as a factor in under-education is nonsensical—or at the very least, unrecognizable.

As I have demonstrated, culture discourses are a very effective way to avoid talking about race or racism. It is the refusal to acknowledge the existence of racism that makes teacher racism impossible to fathom. While racism is constructed through language, it is equally constructed through silences that can be equally racializing (Pollock, 2004; Leonardo, 2009). Pollock’s (2004) study, entitled “Colormute” describes teachers’ fear of reproducing racism through acknowledging student race; Pollock acknowledges talking about race can have negative effects and “it is always unclear when we are making race matter appropriately” (p. 239). It is important for educators to acknowledge how Aboriginality has been made to matter in schools through
differential treatment and discrimination. Remaining “colormute” and defaulting to culture talk precludes such discussions. It is much easier to talk about cultural differences and the need to expand one’s repertoire of traditional Aboriginal cultural knowledge than it is to engage in an examination of one’s own assumptions about and differential treatment of Aboriginal students. As Pollock argues, “occasionally celebrating ‘diversity’…[is] relatively easy; it is the racial inequalities affecting individuals and institutions that people struggle most to describe” (Pollock, 2004, p. 230). Leonardo (2009a) argues the evasion of a “race analysis of education should not be represented as [teachers] nonparticipation in a racial order. In fact, it showcases precisely how they do perpetuate the racial order by turning the other cheek to it or pretending it does not exist” (p. 231).

I recognize that my analysis does not take into consideration the benefits of learning and teaching about Aboriginal culture and that not all Aboriginal cultural teachings are superficial and take the form of making tuna-can drums and dream-catchers. When “learning about the other” (Kumashiro, 2000), if what materializes is “an appreciation that the heritage, language, customs, and self-identification of the other are as significant, diverse and fluid as one’s own” (Schick, 2009, p. 122), Aboriginal cultural teaching can indeed be a part of unlearning racism and building settler-Aboriginal alliances. The problem is when culture is the only answer and prevents an examination of racial discrimination and schooling exclusions. Following St. Denis (2004) whose work has been central to my questioning of how culture theory “reigns supreme in explanations of both educational failure and success in Aboriginal students” (p. 45), I also contend that “perhaps it is time to redefine the problems that contribute to the educational failure of Aboriginal students” (p. 45). As I will continue to demonstrate throughout this dissertation, the construction of unequal subjectivities brought upon by racial discrimination is an excellent place to start.
Chapter 6
Inferiorizing Discourses and Schooling Exclusions

While the school regularly exhorts its students to strive for and/or display such characteristics and so constitute themselves as the good student, it is the student who does not do so who is the focus of institutional discourses of deficit. In Foucauldian terms, all students are subjected to the hierarchical observation and normalizing judgment of the disciplinary institution. But it is the bad student that simultaneously provokes and is constituted through the citation and inscription of a multitude of discourses that identify and diagnose her/his deficits, and the deployment of disciplinary technologies of correction. And as these discourses invoke the bad student, they also inscribe that which the bad student is not – the good student. (Youdell, 2006a, p. 98)

This chapter explores a set of normative, inferiorizing assumptions about Aboriginal students, the schools they attend, and their parents and families. Following Youdell (2006a), I argue that understandings and identifications of Aboriginal students “are not simply teachers’ perceptions of students, but are implicated in creating students in these terms” (p. 97). The discourses I examine might also be called deficit discourses—“forms of knowledge which measure deviations from the norm” (Carrington, 2011). However, I prefer the term “inferiorizing” as I believe it more closely reflects the productive power of deficit discourses. The inferiorizing discourses about Aboriginal peoples I present in this chapter produce them as degenerate, and their lives as containing little of value. These are contemporary colonial discourses steeped in the historicity of nation-building; Thobani (2007) reminds us that “nation-building was steeped as much in the epistemic ejection of Aboriginal peoples from the category human as it was in the dispossession of Aboriginal peoples from their lands” (p. 101). While the devaluation of personhood is linked to the construction of criminality, the discourses presented in this chapter
are, more importantly, part of a broader set of discourses constructing Aboriginal peoples as devoid of the qualities and values of the nation—subject positionings that provoke anxiety, if not outright hostility (Thobani, 2007). The critical criminological framework of this study proposes that instead of looking to lower rates of incarceration by understanding why Aboriginal peoples commit crime (Schissel & Brooks, 2008), it is more important to study how knowledge is produced that makes it possible, and seemingly natural, for the subject category of criminal to be pressed upon Aboriginal peoples. By demonstrating how schools are sites of struggle where subordinating and inferiorizing knowledges about who can and cannot be a citizen are (re)produced but also resisted, I suggest some answers to this question.

This chapter will establish how educators understand Aboriginal learners to be “always already” positioned as undesirable students—as Jo points out, Aboriginal students are perceived as “not as able, unmotivated, and disengaged.” Power relations within discourses produce “truths” about what it means to be an Aboriginal student. The danger of these truths is that it forces Aboriginal students “into a subjectivity that was ‘always already’ there (Butler, 1992), a subjectivity that was always and should always be ‘true’” (Jackson, 2001, p. 392). Therefore, when educators reject these discourses, and engage in a “constitutive struggle” (Youdell, 2006b, p. 97), they open up the possibilities for who can be considered a learner. This is possible because the “truth” about Aboriginal students is “socially constructed by the material and cultural practices of its subjects, [and] it is open for reconfiguration and transgression” (Jackson, 2001, p. 392).

The first part of this chapter is concerned with inferiorizing assumptions about schools with high populations of Aboriginal youth (specifically, community schools); Part Two is concerned with the consequences of inferiorizing assumptions about community schools, including low student expectations; and Part Three deals with inferiorizing productions of Aboriginal parents. In all three sections, I demonstrate how these undergirding assumptions
naturalize exclusionary processes, maintain the subject positionings of the troubled Aboriginal student and the exalted virtuous educator, and are implicated not only in the making of impossible Aboriginal learners, but also in the making of impossible *citizens*.

As I will demonstrate through the use of subtitles throughout, the constitution of the Aboriginal student as an impossible and undesirable learner is embedded with normative assumptions that might be interpreted as rules of conduct and rhetorical manoeuvres of innocence that are employed by—and also refused by—teachers in community schools. Whether they are implicit or explicit, refused or accepted, I argue that these normative rules set the stage for the constitutive struggles in which educators must engage to reposition their Aboriginal students as acceptable learners. Everyone—white, racialized, and Aboriginal educators—is invited to participate in these processes by citing racist colonial discourses. As I will demonstrate, while Aboriginal teachers in this study are less likely to participate in these processes, they are nevertheless both invited and pressured to do so. This underlines Cappello’s (2012) argument that teacher discourses have always been shaped by white supremacy, no matter who cites them.

### Inferiorizing Productions of Community Schools

This section is concerned with the racializing outcomes of inferiorizing productions of community schools. Recall that community schools are predominantly located in lower socio-economic areas and have significant populations of Aboriginal students (Government of Saskatchewan, 2012). Consequently, community schools have become synonymous with Aboriginality, even if they have a predominantly non-Aboriginal population. All of the participants in this study have taught in one or more schools designated as “community.” At the time of the data collection for this study, all but four participants were teaching in community schools. I argue that inferiorizing productions of community schools constitute the Aboriginal students who attend them as “impossible students” (Youdell, 2006a). Drawing from Youdell, I
employ the term “impossible student” to refer to Aboriginal students whose constitutions are so at odds with normative student expectations that they are cast outside the bounds of acceptable student status. But importantly—as I will demonstrate in this chapter—it is the space of the community school, intertwined with negative subjectivities, that casts students as already unacceptable despite their individual actions. In naming places, race needs not be named—instead, spaces invoke the identity category of Aboriginal. “As a marker of difference and an indicator of respectability, space cannot be underestimated as a sign of personhood and legitimacy” (Schick, 2002, p. 101). Spaces inhabited by Aboriginal peoples are often perceived by outsiders as dangerous places where alcoholism, drug abuse, crime and welfare dependency are commonplace (Razack, 2000; Comack & Balfour, 2004; Cowlishaw, 2003)—and I argue that schools with high numbers of Aboriginal students are no exception. Participants’ excerpts in this section call to mind Pollock’s (2004) study in an inner-city high school in California, where staff and students often complained

No one on the outside ever seemed to see this ‘real’ Columbus. To many…the name ‘Columbus’ conjured up instead an unsavory world…those who muttered it often smirked in silence or pity…Columbus teachers said that when they told others their place of employment, they were often greeted with murmurs of sympathy. (p. 134)

Following Pollock’s (2004) frame of analysis, I demonstrate how public connotations about community schools reach incoming teachers and students before they themselves reach community schools, and how this public analysis of community schools as inferior seeps into school walls, shaping the schools’ discursive planes—which serves as a reminder that the teachers’ discourses in this chapter are social discourses and not individual. Throughout multiple interviews, participants spoke of the differences between community schools and non-community schools, and of the different discursive planes through which teachers can be recognized as “good” teachers in different schools.
God help us.

In the following excerpts, Jasmine, Rock, Lana, Melissa, and Robin negotiate the inferiorizing discourses that circulate about their past and present schools—both inside and outside school walls. Lana, Robin, Rock, Barb, and Melissa do not accept their subjectivations as unlucky teachers, or as teachers to be pitied. Conversely, Jasmine accepts as truth that working in a community school with a predominantly Aboriginal population has meant that her job is more stressful, and in some ways undesirable:

[Outsiders say], “You must have a hard, rough time. You must be exhausted by the end of the day. Or, it must be tough on you.” You know like, “It must be stressful.” And the turnover here is quite a bit too—staff turnover. (Oh, okay). Like even our administrators, there’s been a constant—because I guess it does get stressful. You know, one thing I’ve noticed overall, based upon the location of where the school is, you hear about these, you know, people talk. They say, “Oh, [end of town] schools.”

Space emerges in the above excerpt as a marker of illegitimacy, making it impossible for Jasmine’s school to be recognized as anything but a school with challenging students. In the next excerpt, Jasmine leaves intact the discourse of her school as an undesirable place to work, even though her own experiences have contradicted the inferiorizing assumptions made by outsiders.

When I was a substitute teacher, I used to come to [name of current school] quite a bit, and I remember the first time I got the call, I thought: “Oh my gosh.” Because you hear about these schools—that there’s so much trouble, and you know, the kids are wild, and whatever. So the substitute teacher, when I got that call the first time, I thought, Oh my God. Help me. But when I came in here, maybe because I am a visible minority, I had absolutely no problem. (Okay). And also, like I think kids know that I genuinely want their wellbeing. I look after their wellbeing. And they can sense it. I think kids sense if you really care for them or if it’s superficial. My heart is invested in the kids and they can see it. So I feel partly me being a visibly minority and they can see, you know what? I think she really cares about us. That’s why they respond. That’s what, and I don’t like to say to the staff, because you know, I’m not better than anybody else, but by like—I kind of model that. And lots of the teachers say, you know these kids really gravitate towards you because you’re so gentle with them. You seem to really truly love them. And that’s what they need.

Jasmine attributes her lack of encountered problems in her school to her own racial background—recall that Jasmine self-identifies as South Asian—but even more so to a genuine
investment in her students’ wellbeing. While I do not argue that all pedagogical practices are equal or that Jasmine does not work effectively with Aboriginal youth, her truth productions do not trouble the discourse of Aboriginal youth as difficult and undesirable, which is taken up as common sense. The “good” behaviour of the Aboriginal student can only be understood as resulting only from the civilizing forces of educators such as herself. Jasmine accepts her positioning as a teacher to be pitied and positions herself as a loving caregiver to the students in her school, who thus become positioned as students in need. Jasmine does not interrupt the discourse that her students are especially unruly and difficult, despite claiming that when she came to the school she had “absolutely no problem.” She leaves negative discourses intact by attributing her lack of issues to her own pedagogical practices, and in this way, Jasmine cites the discourses of students in a community school as unloved and troubled, but able to be saved.

Problematising Jasmine’s proclaimed gentleness and love is difficult; as I discussed in the previous chapter, discourses of empathy and recognition can entail authoritarian solutions (Cowlishaw, 2003). Yet I do not reject Jasmine’s contention that she cares for her students and that they appreciate her approach. Following Kumashiro (2009), I aim to trouble this version of truth in order to explore what it makes possible, which I argue is a paternalistic racism that leads to exclusionary consequences for Aboriginal students. While the kindest and caring teachers in community schools may be perceived as the “best” teachers, pastoral power plays out through their displays of love, and when relationships to students are organized by a concern for their personal wellbeing. It is through proclamations of care that students become subjects in need of the pedagogical discipline of the Western citizen.

Also surfacing in the last excerpt is Jasmine’s proclaimed difference from her colleagues. Throughout the transcripts, almost all of the participants position themselves as different from their colleagues, and this self-positioning as different may very well have begun with some of the participants’ decision to participate. When outlining the negative behaviours of their
colleagues, participants are careful to affirm that they do not participate in the same exclusionary practices that target Aboriginal youth. This discourse demonstrates that teachers are well versed in the performance of innocence and securing their non-complicity in educational inequality. More importantly, this discourse serves to erase the possibility of an extant problem—if racism is always about somebody else, then it is no one’s problem at all.

Recall that at the time of his interview, Rock, who is white, had recently begun teaching in a school with predominantly racialized students. Even though his school has a diverse student population, he believes it is the Aboriginal students in his school who are the racial Other. This finding is consistent with Schick and St. Denis’ (2005) argument that even though several visible minorities make the prairie provinces their home, the racial Other is typically understood to be Aboriginal peoples. Schools are no exception to this rule; Rock describes how the Aboriginal students in his school are singled out by teachers and by their classmates as well, who avoid them, speak harshly to them, and even scold them for being off task. Throughout his interview, Rock outlines the differences he perceives in his new school as they relate to expectations of student behaviour and academic success, as well as expectations of his performance as a teacher. In the following excerpts, Rock resists the negative meanings that are made of community schools and the possibilities for his own subject positionings within them.

The school that I’m currently teaching at like I said is a community school, but it’s still in a neighborhood that I wouldn’t say that’s identified as you know, core. And the student population is, you know, Aboriginal, and a lot of English as an additional language students… I’ve had colleagues say to me, “You know what, you’re going to do so well at that school,” when I found out that I was transferring there from my other school. The principal has said, “You are”—and he’s addressing the whole staff, saying—“You know what, you are here because of your gifts, because this is a different school and you are here because not everyone can teach in a school like this”…

When I tell people where I teach, I don’t tell them it’s a community school. Where do you teach? Oh, I teach at Green School. Oh where is that? Oh, it’s you know, I tell them what part of the city it’s in. You know, I don’t feel the need to say it’s a community school. I do tell them that I’m really enjoying it, that I’m getting to know about different cultures because we are an EAL school. I’ll mention that, before I say it’s a community school…I think that people think that’s there’s you know, more problems, the kids are tougher, and don’t work as hard. It’s, you know that, it’s a more stressful job, that there’s kids, kids
aren’t being fed by their families, and you know the parents aren’t as supportive or involved…Yeah, I think yeah, a community school, as soon as you say community school, they have preconceived notions of what you’re going to find within that school.

When speaking to outsiders, Rock safeguards the legitimacy of his school, and his identity as a legitimate teacher, by underlining that his school is not in a core neighbourhood. He positions himself as a good Canadian by stating his enjoyment of learning about “different cultures.” The neighbourhood in which his school is located is not one that is automatically associated with Aboriginal peoples—however, the label of “community school” is, and Rock avoids mentioning this label. This avoidance can only make sense in a social context with deeply embedded assumptions about community schools—assumptions of which Rock is well aware. Rock attempts then to reposition his students from what they are “always already” from the outsider’s gaze—poor, unmotivated, and undisciplined. Who then can a teacher be in a community school?

As cited by Rock’s principal, a community schoolteacher can be a “special kind of person,” someone with “gifts,” because one would have to be such a person under the imagined circumstances.

The pervasive social imaginary of community schools as stressful environments rife with poverty, violence, and unsupportive parents, makes it possible for the educators who teach there to be positioned differently than teachers in mainstream schools. The positioning is often one of a heroic caregiver, or even one who is to be pitied—positionings resisted by Rock, and as demonstrated in the previous chapter by Barb, accomplished through her positive descriptions of her school and students. Recall the White Lady Bountiful presented in the literature review (Harper & Cavanagh, 1994; Meiners, 2010b). The findings of this study reveal that the White Lady Bountiful archetype is an available identity to all teachers of Aboriginal youth, not only white women. The opportunity to be a heroic caregiver, however, is only presented if students are positioned as in need, violent, uneducable, or in other ways inferior to students in mainstream schools. Rock troubles this discourse through his attempt to reconstitute his learners and
problematize the assumptions made of the students in his school—attempts that can only make sense in a discursive context where negative constitutions of community schools are taken for granted.

This is not a part of our world.

Early in Lana’s career, she spent time working in a band-operated school. Recall that Lana is white. To describe this work, Lana uses the metaphor of “walking into a part of the world that was not my own.” In the following excerpt, Lana discusses an incident where one of her female students was sexually assaulted on the weekend and wrote about it in her journal at school the next day.

And I just found it was very hard because you know, it would be the kids in the class that it would happen with, and I don’t know that it was always them that would do it to other people. When drinking occurred, I think it was to the point that there wasn’t any control when things happened. And I felt devastated by that, and I was just a person that heard about it. And I was just surprised, because it was not of my world. It was a part of the world that I was walking into. And I—it was very hard.

My intention is not to argue the validity of Lana’s feelings or the difficulty of negotiating such challenges in a school. Instead, I suggest that through these experiences, despite their very real emotional effects on Lana, Lana also came to know herself. Such violence occurs in a part of the world that is not her own, which is experienced in relation to the subordinate Aboriginal world. Lana does not imagine that the binge-drinking and sexual violence that she hears about second-hand while living in the Aboriginal community are events that occur in her world as well. Her metaphor of living in a different world serves to confirm her own white innocence and respectability. This excerpt recalls Razack’s (2014) description of non-Aboriginal peoples’ rhetorical manoeuvres that produce spaces inhabited by Aboriginal peoples in ways that “make this world appear as a shadow world, a world that is the antithesis of respectability, where young people drink for long hours in less than reputable places” (p. 70). Razack contends that non-
Aboriginal peoples come to know these spaces as places where they do not belong.

Lana also discusses the comments made to her by colleagues when she was teaching in a band-operated school. She is aware of how she was subjectivated as a teacher who is to be pitied, and she bounces back and forth between accepting and rejecting this positioning.

Like, comments from other teachers was that they felt lucky that they weren’t teaching there [in her former band operated school] because it’s very tiring, exhausting, like it’s a mental load that you’re dealing with, right? All the social issues, the kind of heartbreak issues. And that, that kind of wears you down, tires you out. You know. That everybody wants to work at a school like Moss Lake or River Rock. Like I don’t know that I’d want to, but I know that it’s been perceived that way, that if you get those choice schools, where the, the kids coming are from middle to wealthy families, that it’s an easier road. I just think it’s a different road. I don’t know if it’s easier.

During Lana’s time teaching in a band-operated school, there were a number of student suicides, which is what she is referring to in the above excerpt as the “heartbreak issues.” Despite describing her time at the band-operated school as difficult for these reasons, Lana does not fully accept as truth that working in a school with middle-class and wealthy families is an “easier” road, thus resisting the subjectivity as teacher who is to be pitied, and the production of her students as inferior.

**Don’t label us a community school.**

Lana’s school is exceptional because it has a high Aboriginal population but is not a designated community school. At one point, steps were being undertaken to receive this designation, which would have provided her school with additional funding for programs the staff felt would be beneficial for the students. However, the designation was successfully protested by a group of non-Aboriginal parents. Lana presumes that this label would have meant being associated with Aboriginality:

Lana: Well I think it’s because it was a community—the name community. They didn’t want to, it wasn’t—I think it was overruled by the middle class parents is what it was.

Amanda: I wonder why—what kinds of images, or what kinds of, um, different ideas are associated with community schools, do you think?
Lana: Well, I think they think that it would be um, maybe—I, I think number one would be that it’s a high Native content. Or you know the number of students that you would have, maybe the low socio-economic stigma that would come with it, and maybe it’s just easier to pretend that it’s not here. It’s not reality.

Middle class parents’ resistance to a label associated with Aboriginality only makes sense in a discursive context where Aboriginality is undesirable and their student status is impossible—evidenced by the fact that their resistance to becoming a community school cost the school the additional funding it would otherwise have received. Parents’ resistance to this label is in some ways similar to Rock’s purposeful omission of this label in describing his school; by refusing the term, the legitimacy of the school is safeguarded. If their school were to become a “community school” and therefore be automatically associated with Aboriginality, their legitimate teacher and learner status would be threatened. Aboriginality in the space of the school is disruptive to whites’ sense of superiority and belonging in the settler world; the solution is for the school to remain white. In Lana’s example, resistance to the label of community school reinscribes the inferiorizing discourse of community schools.

Aspire to teach “up here.”

Robin, who is Métis, expresses her frustration that the predominantly Aboriginal students in her community school are refused entry into the category of legitimate student through inferiorizing discourses. She expresses frustration over the comments that are continuously made to her by colleagues in different schools that produce her school as an undesirable space to work, and position her students as un-intelligent and unsuccessful.

I don’t know how many in-services I go to where people are like: “Oh, you’re still in X? Oh, how is it down there?”… And because people see my school, or the [end of town], as the school where kids don’t succeed. And your kids aren’t as smart as ours up here. So even, even in the school system there’s rampant racism…And it’s—it is continual. It is continual.
Taken for granted is that Robin should aspire to teach elsewhere. By naming such remarks as rampant racism, Robin interrupts the assumed inferiority of her school. Here, space—the location of the school—is the marker of legitimacy and of a “good school.” To be in a school “up here” is to be in a desirable space with desirable students. In prairie cities, certain ends of town have become synonymous with Aboriginality, and to invoke an end of town is to invoke “Aboriginal.” Invoking space instead of naming the Aboriginality with which the space is associated is a means by which the speaker can safely participate in racism. Again, by naming her colleagues’ comments as racism, Robin produces a version of truth that interrupts common assumptions about the school as inferior.

**Be stunned by success.**

Melissa, who is also Métis, shares her experiences of people being alarmed when she tells them where she grew up, which is the “undesirable” part of her city with a high Aboriginal population. Melissa is forced to try and undo what she is “always already” in the eyes of outsiders—someone who *should not* have been “successful.”

I grew up in the [end of town] and when people find that out they cannot believe that. Yeah I did, and they look at me as if to say, like well you *shouldn’t be successful*, you *shouldn’t be* where you are, you shouldn’t look the way you look, or drive what you drive, or live where you live, or have the life that you do because you grew up in the [end of town]. And they can’t believe it, they look at me completely stunned, it’s like you dropped this bomb on them when you tell them that (oh wow) yeah, and I think yeah—I did, I came from the [end of town] and you know what, I’m doing okay, and so are most of the kids I went to school with.

Melissa’s descriptions reflect the ways in which Aboriginal peoples are not only forced to explain and be accountable for anything in their lives considered “failures”—they also must justify how and why they have defied racist normative expectations and narrow subjectivities. The concept of the “always already” degenerate Aboriginal person is exemplified through Melissa’s subjectivation as someone who “shouldn’t” have been “successful.” By becoming a teacher,
Melissa defied the normative low expectations of herself and her former classmates, and in doing so, her story is also one of resilience and resistance.

**Tell the violent stories.**

The investment in the imagined degeneracy of Aboriginal peoples as an important identity-making process for educators working in schools with Aboriginal youth has been noted by Max (2005), a teacher who spent time working in northern Aboriginal communities: “Creating the other is part of creating an identity that allows white people to see [themselves] as helpers, generous and giving” (p. 84). Speaking from her own experiences, Max (2005) points out, “it was like they seemed to one up each other with who had the most ghoulish story about working in the North. This allowed us to construct people as victims with sites of agency erased or portrayed as deviant. At the same time we positioned ourselves as altruistic and generous” (p. 85).

During our interview, Barb tells me that there *were* negative stories, involving gangs and violence. She states that she was choosing to tell the *positive* stories. And indeed, through the stories Barb tells, she produces her community school as made up of happy, bright, and high-performing learners for whom she and her teaching staff hold high expectations. Even though she alludes at times to dysfunction in the lives of some of her students, Barb does not produce her students as *nothing but* these issues. Barb’s refusal to engage in negative storytelling likely stems from her awareness that Aboriginal communities “are being overpowered by stereotypes of an all-pervasive violence and misery. Violence and misery may be apparent in many communities, but they are only part of a far more complex and interesting story” (Cowlishaw, 2003, p. 107). It is the far more interesting and complex story that Barb chooses to tell, and in doing so, she produces a counter version of who her Aboriginal students are, and who she is as well.
Section summary.

This section has demonstrated how schools with predominantly Aboriginal students, which are often designated as community schools, are continuously subjected to inferiorizing discourses. The category of a community school is laden with racist, normative expectations about the Aboriginal youth who attend them; most often, these expectations are invoked not through the naming of race, but space. Space is marked by people who inhabit it; therefore, to denigrate a space is to denigrate those who live there, and to “deem certain bodies and subjects in specific spaces as undeserving of full personhood” (Razack, 2000, p. 94). I will demonstrate throughout the rest of this chapter how inferiorizing discourses about community schools also pave the way for the normalization of schooling exclusions, guarding the space of the school as a white space.

Low Expectations and the Consequences of Inferiority

Little can be done with him (the Indian child). He can be taught to do a little farming, and stock raising, and to dress in a more civilized manner, but that is all. The child who goes to a day school learns little while his tastes are fashioned at home, and his inherited aversion to toil is in no way combatted. (Indian Affairs Branch, 1879-1880, as cited in Kirkness, 1999, p. 3)

What everyday practices are possible and normalized in a school designated as “community” or one with a high population of Aboriginal students? This section begins to answer this question by demonstrating the taken-for-granted exclusionary practices in such schools. These practices are not only consequences of inferiorizing discourses; they are bound up in the ongoing constitution of students and part of circular chains of discourse. Therefore, although I endeavour to use this section to point to the schooling exclusions that stem from inferiorizing discourses, these
exclusions are themselves part of the ongoing constitution of Aboriginal students as unacceptable in the space of the school. As I will demonstrate, participants (Rock, Susan, Jo, Nicole, and Ryan) produce as truth that Aboriginal youth receive a substandard education—from other teachers, never themselves—and that this stems from the identity category of Aboriginal. The discourses in this chapter support Leonardo’s (2013) assertion that “whites are also invested in the perceived lower cognitive capacities of many students of color” (p. 121).

**Don’t work so hard.**

Susan discusses the lower academic and social expectations for the students in her current school, with a predominantly Aboriginal student body, relative to those in her former school. She situates herself outside of these discourses and explains how she is different from the other teachers, particularly in regards to her expectations for students’ academic achievement and their social behaviour. She emphasizes that even though her own teaching practices have not changed, the rules that teachers abide by in her new school are different than what she had become accustomed to in her former school.

But my expectations here, I haven’t lowered from when I was at [former schools] and I still do the same here, or try to, that I did at my other schools. But I do notice, and I was told by a couple of teachers from Turquoise School, that you have no correcting to do, you have no planning to do, you just show up with the kids and you just teach the ones that are there (oh wow). And I was like, “Really?” And there are some teachers who don’t correct, who don’t plan. I don’t think they even have a day planner, or let alone stuff written in it.

Correcting student work and lesson planning were likely valorized in Susan’s previous school and recognized as “good” teaching. In her new school, however, Susan perceives that teachers break traditional teaching norms, and that she also has permission to do so—though she maintains that she refuses to do this. Susan also describes an incident where a colleague questioned her for correcting her students’ work. The colleague approached her as she was sitting amidst a pile of corrections: “What are you doing?” her colleague asked. Such a question can
only make sense in the discursive terrain of a community school, and it is a question that is constitutive of students as undeserving non-learners. Susan’s insistence that she hasn’t lowered her expectations can also only make sense in the social context of this study, where it is assumed that teachers will lower their academic expectations for students in community schools because of their Aboriginality.

**It wouldn’t be worth the time.**

Jo expresses frustration because she feels that a number of her colleagues do not present the Aboriginal students in her school with engaging curriculum. She questions why it is that the students in her school “struggle with learning” and attributes this to a number of factors, one of them being low academic expectations. She underlines that students in all schools struggle with learning in one way or another, but that “it just so happens that there are so many more at [this] school. Many more.” In the following excerpt, Jo describes a behavioural program at her school that is meant to improve students’ social skills and in-class behaviour. Jo feels that perhaps the behavioural issues in the classroom are a result of teachers’ lowered academic expectations for Aboriginal students.

Or some of them I think it’s because of the variety of teaching styles, and expectations. I think sometimes the expectations are not high enough. Because of—and this is very judgmental—I’ll just say that right up front. Because of the way some people view First Nations students as being not as able to as others, the expectations are not then as high. And I think sometimes lower expectations do not, they’re not the results that you would necessarily hope for.

Amanda: Okay, so not as able to? Can you finish that? Not as able to what would you say?

Jo: What did I say?

Amanda: Um, I understand what you’re saying, and I’m just wondering if you could give me some examples because you said sometimes you feel that First Nations students are perceived as not as able to (oh).

Jo: Not as able to (. ) Well, not as intelligent perhaps. Or not as, um, motivated. Or don’t care about their learning. Or, um, you know, those kinds of things. My perception is that
effort isn’t put into the planning of motivating and engaging lessons because those—it wouldn’t be worth it anyway, is the mentality of some teachers. I ran into that at [former school] as well. It’s the mentality that, well they’re just going to end up, um you know, being a housekeeper or on the street or whatever, so really it doesn’t matter. You know it doesn’t matter. It’s almost kind of that idea of marking time and getting them through the year and you know.

Jo is careful to state that negative views of First Nations students are only the views of “some” people; in this way, racism is about the bad actions of a few individuals. However, Jo’s descriptions allude to assumptions that are actually quite pervasive, countering the notion that there are only a handful of teachers who hold them. Jo attempts to trouble the truth that Aboriginal students are less intelligent and don’t care about their learning. Instead, she produces as taken for granted that this is how Aboriginal youth are subjectivated. These negative discourses not only shape the work of teachers who accept them as truth, but also the work of teachers who trouble them, like Jo. This is a finding consistent with several other participants’ descriptions, including Rock, Valerie, Ryan, and Robin. My own reaction in the above excerpt—“I understand what you’re saying”—is an affirmation that speaks to the implicit understanding that exists between Jo and me in regards to what it is possible to say about Aboriginal students—that is to say, what is intelligible and recognizable. This is clear in my own affirmation of Jo’s knowledge productions, as well as in her statement “You know, those kinds of things.” Jo takes for granted that I am aware of what “those kinds of things” might be—and she is accurate.

Keep it simple.

Nicole expresses her disappointment at finding a file cabinet full of word searches in her new classroom in an inner-city alternative school with predominantly Aboriginal students:

I’m just like, like the worst storyteller. When I got there my classroom in the back room there was like umm…there was file cabinets and this is no word of a lie—file cabinets with at least like three drawers filled front to back with word finds, so there was no actual curricular content, they were word finds, so they were like making kids busy! I don’t know, it was just so (uh hum) so nonsensical, so, so upsetting.
In her anger and disappointment at finding a filing cabinet full of mindless activities to occupy students, Nicole troubles the discourses undergirding their presence. The word finds, representative of an educational practice, are “imbued with ideology and discourse” (Wetherell & Potter, 1992, p. 61). Youdell (2006b) explains that discursive “performatives might be deployed through silence, through what is unspoken and through what is not done” (p. 36). What makes a cabinet of word finds—left behind by someone who is obviously unconcerned by the repercussions of them being found—possible? Where would such a discovery make sense? Only in a school where students are not expected to learn. Nicole’s choice of the word “nonsensical” is interesting because it disrupts the taken-for-grantedness of the situation. The absence of the curricular content—replaced with word finds—is constitutive of the students in the school as unacceptable learners. Nicole’s opening statement—“I’m just like, the worst storyteller”—suggests the taken-for-grantedness that substandard teaching practices for Aboriginal students are not only the untold stories—but they are also the unwelcome stories. Nicole is outing the overt racial discrimination that is supposed to be left untold.

**Section summary.**

In this section, I have argued that substandard educational practices—including poor planning and evaluation practices, and denying students a rigorous and engaging curriculum—are constitutive of Aboriginal students as undesirable learners. I have demonstrated that for teachers in schools with Aboriginal students, they need not feel accountable to their students, their colleagues, or their superiors. These are the outcomes of inferiorizing discourses about Aboriginal youth that position them as undeserving of an education.
Inferiorizing Productions of Aboriginal Parents

The boarding school dissociates the Indian child from the deleterious home influences to which he would otherwise be subjected. It reclaims him from the uncivilized state in which he has been brought up. It brings him into contact day to day with all that tends to effect a change in his views and habits of life. By precept and example he is taught to endeavour in what will be most useful to him. (1889 report from the Department of Indian Affairs, as cited in Comack, 2012, p. 73)

If the Canadian family was exalted as the bedrock of the nation, and its reproduction was articulated in the social programs of the nation, the Aboriginal family was constituted as a threat to national advancement (Thobani, 2007, p. 197).

This section is concerned with inferiorizing productions of Aboriginal parents and students’ home lives, a theme that has already surfaced in Chapter Five where I demonstrated how displays of empathy and historical knowledge serve to justify racist practices of exclusion of Aboriginal students, and to constitute Aboriginal parents as wounded and downtrodden. Key to the overall argument of this thesis, I underline that discourses that subjectivate Aboriginal parents as unfit are nationalist discourses as these productions define Aboriginal peoples as devoid of the values and qualities of the nation (Thobani, 2007). The discourses in this chapter echo those of the residential school era—“the residential school system institutionalized the idea that Aboriginal families were incommensurable with the national ideal and that the ‘welfare’ of Aboriginal children was in conflict with that of their families and communities, including that of their mothers” (Thobani, 2007, p. 199). I will demonstrate how these discourses continue to circulate and to be inseparable from educational practices. I highlight how in their contemporary forms, inferiorizing discourses about Aboriginal parents are taken up by white, racialized, and Aboriginal peoples, who are in turn “rewarded (produced) as respectable” (Comeau, 2005b, p. 68).
In returning to the theme of Aboriginal parents, I also suggest some answers to the question that surfaced in the last section: how are educators recognized as “good” teachers of Aboriginal youth? I argue that for educators of Aboriginal youth, this is accomplished not through scholarly rigour and academic achievements, but instead, through claims to an unwavering commitment to one’s job that are premised on positioning students as in need. Again, this is knowledge produced from the pastoral power that organizes how teachers understand their relationships to their Aboriginal students. I will demonstrate how the inferiorizing of Aboriginal parents is an important identity-making process for educators working in schools with Aboriginal youth, and through which they can come to know themselves as exalted subjects (Thobani, 2007) of the nation. I will also demonstrate how educators are working to change the discourses surrounding Aboriginal parents, thus refusing to inferiorize and subjugate them or blame them for student failure. In following with the last section, the subtitles are meant to represent the tactics, normative rules, and rhetorical manoeuvres deployed—but also resisted—by participants that subordinate and inferiorize Aboriginal parents.

**Fix their home lives.**

The following excerpt is Dante’s response to my question of how the teachers at his school, where students are predominantly Aboriginal, are different from teachers at a school with mainly non-Aboriginal youth:

Well, they’re dynamic. These teachers are passionate. I mean, (okay) you have lots of teachers that you can, that are, are excellent (uh hum) but you need a certain teacher to be at that school. When I say that, that means it’s going above and beyond. I mean it’s not a 9 o’clock till 3:30 job that we know as teachers—that’s not your job. I mean you, we do way more than that…So the teachers that are there knew what they were going into, like we’re helping inner-city, at risk kids, so we got to be invested, not just for their academics, but their life so to speak. I go in the homes, I have to pick them up, see what’s going on, problem solve with them, almost counsel, social work, attendant, be happy you know, what’s your problems, what can we do, different agencies to work with so they can make sure we can tackle those issues because they all come with a whole box, box of garbage so to speak, inside and with the family, so those teachers that are there—I mean
Mr. Barrington, the principal, had to hire people that are not just great teachers, (uh hum) but teachers that would fit that program, so he always said there’s great teachers out there, but I wouldn’t hire any of them, because they don’t fit this program.

Dante constructs his students’ neighbourhood, and consequently his students’ homes, as risky spaces rife with problems. This allows Dante to imagine the teachers in his school as extraordinary; he describes them as exceptionally devoted, a positioning that is made possible through the imagined degenerate home lives of his students who arrive at school with “a whole box of garbage.” Dante’s description of teachers being available outside of school hours, and visiting their students’ homes to play the role of social worker, resonates with colonial salvation discourses. His description of “going into” his students’ homes resonates with Razack’s (2004) argument that identity making is at play through the movement of non-Aboriginal peoples in urban cities from what are considered respectable spaces to degenerate spaces: “they learn who they are, and, more importantly, who they are not” (p. 95). Dante’s metaphor of the teachers knowing what they are “getting into” further positions teachers as courageously undertaking a dangerous risk. This is a metaphor commonly used to describe something with unknown and potentially perilous consequences. Dante’s own sense of self is experienced in relation to the subordinate Aboriginal students and families. A good teacher in Dante’s context exhibits a passion that can only be felt for the Aboriginal child who is need of salvation.

In the next excerpt, Dante discusses his wish for his students to be able to travel outside of their neighbourhoods:

Some of them just see their mom and dad not finishing high school and that’s okay for them and you know what, my mom and dad and my brothers, they’re already dropouts in grade nine, grade ten, that’s okay with me, like my mom and dad didn’t finish. No, that’s not okay, we’re not trying to say that their parents aren’t okay, but listen, there is more to it than that, there’s more, let’s travel, you can see things around the world. Some of these kids haven’t even been out of [city name] (yeah) or across the tracks of [street name]. They don’t know, they don’t know, they know [their neighborhood] very, very well, but they haven’t traveled, they haven’t seen, there’s more to life, let’s give them that, we owe them that as humans I mean, in my mind.
For Dante, his students need to be made aware of the world outside of their neighbourhoods. The point of travelling is not only its educative value, but the reminder to students that there is more to life than what is within their homes and neighbourhoods. Their inhabited spaces are constructed as lesser than; there is more to life than “that”—their inferior home lives and their dangerous neighbourhoods. Dante produces his students’ lack of travel experience as a choice taken by their parents, even though travel may not be a realistic or even desirable option in their lives given that Aboriginal peoples face ongoing racism, hostility, and unwelcoming attitudes when they enter predominantly non-Aboriginal spaces. To stay within the boundaries of urban racial segregation brought on by continued colonialism is understood as living an undesirable and unfulfilling life.

Whereas Dante takes for granted that “going into his students’ homes” is a necessary part of his job, Valerie expresses feeling very uncomfortable being asked to visit students’ homes in her former community school:

I always felt the first few times it was really, really, really difficult because I mean your home is your palace no matter who you are, it’s your, your safety zone or should be, and so when you go there, to a home where okay, for whatever reason the kid is not making it to school, a lot of the people that you go have their backs up as soon as you get to the door. And it’s like who, like here I am coming to their home, like who do I think I am coming to their home? So I always tried to be very apologetic for coming in the first place and make sure that they knew I was there because I was concerned about their child (uh hum) and eventually it would get better in most cases but after I think it was my second or third year there they quit sending teachers because there were so many teachers that felt really uncomfortable doing that that we didn’t go. It was just the social workers that did it after that.

Valerie and her colleagues resisted the normalized practice of educators visiting their students’ homes. She produces a counter-discourse about the homes of her students by using the metaphor of the home as one’s palace—“no matter who you are.” This metaphor also produces as truth that one’s right to privacy in their home should not be contingent on racialized identity categories. Valerie also produces and affirms the humanness of Aboriginal peoples by her apologetic stance
on the issue. Through her question, “Who do I think I am?,” Valerie recognizes the subordination of the parents that takes place by entering her students’ homes.

Wish you could adopt them.

The following excerpt is another example of how Jasmine is able to position her students as in need and herself as a saviour by imagining her students’ home lives as unloving spaces:

I’m committed here. Because I want to see change here. And like I’ve committed, I said five years for sure. Because I want to see change, and I know I have, I have a vision, and if I don’t stay, then I know it will be like I failed the kids because—and some days it’s hard, because you know I go home sometimes thinking oh, I want to take this kid, I want to take this kid, I want to adopt everybody here, because I know the homes that they come from. And like lots of these kids who come and say, oh my mom doesn’t care for me. They don’t feel loved. So it’s just sad. And it’s stressful on me sometimes because like I just want to take everybody home and fix everything you know at, but…

By positioning her students’ parents as uncaring, Jasmine situates herself as loving and dedicated. She is taking on the responsibility of loving unloved children. Like Dante in the first excerpt, Jasmine reiterates colonial salvation discourses. A fantasy to adopt Aboriginal children can only make sense in a discursive context where the Aboriginal parent is produced as unsuitable. In a school with predominantly white children, such adoption fantasies would be perceived as bizarre. When speaking of Aboriginal students however, this is commonsensical. The constitution of Aboriginal parents as unfeeling and incompetent stems from a long history of forced removals of Aboriginal children from their homes as mandated through numerous government policies (Hogg, 2001). In the mid-nineteenth century, “women field workers among the First Nations…condemned the child-rearing practices of Aboriginal women and argued that Native children were best raised away from their biological mothers” (Kelm, as cited in Comeau, 2005b, pp. 71–72). In Canada, this thinking was materialized through the Residential School Era followed by the “Sixties Scoop” and ongoing policies of the child welfare and justice systems.
Hogg (2001) argues that decades of forced removal of Aboriginal children was a practice that “assumed a subject bereft of normal white European structure of psychological effects and refined sensibilities…Taking a child from their parents in any other situation is regarded as repugnant” (p. 365).

You’re their only hope.

Another important part of the construction of Aboriginal students’ home lives as inferior is the production of their homes as devoid of any kind of educative or worthwhile knowledge. Susan imagines that her classroom may be her students’ only opportunity for a meaningful educative experience. After Susan told me she perceives a lack of quality teaching in her school, I ask her whether she feels this is related to the fact that she teaches in a community school with predominantly Aboriginal students.

More than likely, I think between that, and knowing that there are, a lot of parents aren’t out there who are not willing to help their kids? So then why try? Then why do we bother? Because they’re not getting it anywhere else, that’s why.

Susan misses the opportunity to point out the racist practice of not “bothering” to teach Aboriginal students. Instead, she blames Aboriginal parents, leaving intact the innocence of the sub-par teachers. Accepting and reciting the discourse of the unwilling and disengaged Aboriginal parent, Susan positions her classroom as the only space of value in her students’ lives. She places herself apart from her colleagues, whom she claims, “make excuses and just don’t think that these students can do what other students can.” Susan’s insistence that her Aboriginal students are bright and capable learners, which she alludes to several times during our interview, is significant—by positioning Aboriginal students as belonging in school, she disrupts colonial discourses of Aboriginal youth as impossible learners. However, as demonstrated in the above

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11 The 60s Scoop refers to the adoption of First Nation/Métis children in Canada between the years of 1960 and the mid 1980s. This phenomenon was named the “60s Scoop” because the highest numbers of adoptions took place in the decade of the 1960s and because, in many instances, children were literally scooped from their homes and communities without the knowledge or consent of families and bands.
excerpt, Susan produces her classroom as the only possible space in students’ lives where they are going to “get it.” Therefore, her students’ belonging in school is premised upon the social imaginary of home lives devoid of educative value. Education for her students is “the protector and antidote” premised on the “assumption of the racial degeneracy and inferiority of Indigenous people” (Stoler, 1995, as cited in Comeau, 2005b, p. 74).

Like Susan, Jo emphasizes throughout our interview the importance of educators providing a rigorous and engaging curriculum to Aboriginal students, which also serves to reconstitute Aboriginal youth as learners. In the following excerpt, Jo also underlines that white students have access to privileges outside the classroom that Aboriginal students do not, and that “they’ll find their way”:

Those students, coming from different situations, basically sat in their desks, did what they were asked, you know, got their assignments done for the most part and whatever. So I wasn’t as, I didn’t feel as passionately about those kids because I think—my dad was a teacher, and I remember him saying to me when I first started teaching, “Not to worry, they’ll learn in spite of you.” You know the idea, they have advantages. Like most of them go, have gone on some trip or whatever every year, and they have lots of background knowledge about lots of different things. They’ll go on to high school. They’ll find their way. They’ll be fine (mhm). First Nations kids, at [Name of School], who don’t have a lot of necessarily background knowledge about life and so on, we should be working our butts off to engage them, and to get them up—get them to have confidence, and get them to a place where they’re going to have some success in high school…Because First Nations kids, who have enough struggles, many times, in many situations, need strong, engaged teachers.

The above excerpt reflects the layers of complexity within discourse analysis—so much is accomplished through Jo’s production of truth that Aboriginal students should have strong and engaged teachers. First, Jo disrupts the normative discourse of Aboriginal students as non-learners. She produces them as deserving of the best that school has to offer. Jo simultaneously produces her students as learners only when they are in school—they will not learn in spite of her, or their other teachers. While white students’ ways of being and knowing are automatically constructed as worthwhile, the home lives of Aboriginal students are constructed as devoid of educative value. For Aboriginal students, this ensures that school is the protector and the
antidote. At the same time, Jo’s conviction that her students deserve the best teachers validates their personhood and shifts the problem of under-education to the pedagogy of the teachers.

**Encourage them to be healthy, active and well-groomed.**

In the following excerpt, Rock explains how the discourse of the unhealthy and unhygienic Aboriginal family—which means inferior parenting skills—circulates in his school through singling out Aboriginal students for special programming.

There’s a program called “Together” and it encourages families to sign up and then it gets families active, and it’s kind of like a healthy lifestyle kind of thing. Well, the school received some flyers, and our community liaison worker brought me a note and a flyer, and not for the whole class, but for the two students that are Aboriginal…And I’m like, why are you singling those two out?…Like to me, I notice racism at our school.

Amanda: Can you talk to me about what kinds of assumptions might have been made because of that?

Rock: Well, you know, I would say that these two students are, you know, a little bit overweight. There’s that attitude that you know, First Nations people maybe are lazy or that maybe let’s give these flyers to these families because parents aren’t caring for them, and they should be doing more active things with them. That their parenting isn’t as good…I think a lot of these people in my school don’t think they’re being racist, because they’re not using negative words, you know. (mhm). But what they’re saying is very, is very racist.

Rock names the assumptions that undergird the discriminatory practices, and refuses to accept as truth that the Aboriginal students’ families are the only ones that might benefit from such a program. Importantly, he names the discriminatory practices as racism.

Ryan also negotiates a similar discourse in his own school, but is more uncomfortable doing so—that is, he is apprehensive about voicing his realization that there are certain appearance norms that students must adhere to in order to achieve acceptable student status. The following excerpt is taken from the context of Ryan discussing a particular student that comes to mind when he is asked which students he is concerned will be mistreated in high school.

It’s like this kid looks, he’s a Native kid, he’s got dark skin, he’s like he looks Native and, and if he umm wears certain clothes that aren’t—how do I say this? Like for, I think in some ways like if you wear neat, nice clothes and you groom yourself in a certain way
the teachers will perceive you, some teachers will perceive you as whatever, right, like put together. And if you aren’t conforming to that whatever set of images—that is like you’re, you’re not, I don’t know.

Ryan most likely *does* “know” what is likely to happen when a student conforms to a certain set of images, but is uncomfortable naming the identity markers that make a difference. In the case of the student he describes above, Ryan is aware that this student’s obvious Aboriginality sets the student up for trouble. The student’s further inability to perform in student-specific ways through a “well-kept” appearance makes him even more likely to be cast outside the bounds of acceptability.

Dante emphasizes the importance that is placed on personal hygiene and a well-kept appearance in his school. His reasoning is located within the larger category of what he believes his students need to learn in preparation to “get a job.” Alongside personal hygiene, Dante also places importance on structure and routine.

We try to give them routine and structure and some of them aren’t used to that but we have to give them that, and I totally believe that because when they get a job there’s routine and there’s structure. If they don’t get there in time like in a job later down the road they’re gonna get fired, if they don’t get their assignments in and stuff like that in our education traditional system you don’t get those in you fail. So we have to groom them that it’s, it’s important to be on time, it’s important to look proper and hygiene and stuff. We got to show them proper hygiene and cleanliness and all those basic things we take for granted that they, they don’t know. You have to brush your teeth every day, or else you’ll get cavities.

Dante assumes that structure, routine, and personal hygiene are not valued in his students’ home lives, and consequently, it is the responsibility of the school to “give them that.”

Despite the different ways in which participants negotiate the discourse of the unhealthy and unhygienic Aboriginal family as it circulates in schools—Rock and Ryan trouble it while Dante accepts it as commonsense—all three participants are aware of the consequences of not looking a certain way at school. They demonstrate that an unkempt appearance at school is likely to engender disciplinary technologies. Comeau (2005b) argues that during Canada’s nation building period, the “moral” characteristics of the proper Canadian were expressed materially
through the body. “For example, great importance was placed on physical hygiene. In the words printed in the Methodist Christian Guardian, ‘the gospel of the toothbrush, soap and water and flyscreens has a place in life’” (Valverde, 1991, as cited in Comeau, 2005b, p. 77). When participants produce as truth that an important role of the school is to groom Aboriginal students, I argue this is an iteration of the civilizing colonial assumption that it is the responsibility of the colonizer to discipline the impure body of Aboriginal children who are ignorant to the importance of cleanliness. The “unclean” body is also a body that can be disregarded as less important, devoid of personhood, and violable.

**Don't worry too much about the parents.**

I now turn to excerpts from Jasmine’s interview that further exemplify how Aboriginal parents are prohibited from belonging to the involved parent category. Jasmine frames concerns from white parents as stemming from an interest in their child’s education, whereas concerns from Aboriginal parents are framed as resulting from their inadequacies as parents:

Some people do not want to teach at [end of town] schools. You know, where the parents are all professionals and you know, the upper class, because parents are breathing down your neck, right? They would rather deal with kids who are acting up, than these parents breathing down. Like, you’ll have no problems in the classroom, you know, you’ll be able to do your work—complete your curriculum, teach, do whatever you have to do, but one thing you do wrong, the parents will be there….But the community schools—I always thought that the parents are not engaged. Parents are not even—whatever. So it’s the students they need to deal with. But at this school, coming here this year…here’s it’s, you know like I’m trying, I try to analyze why parents sometimes, and it’s not about academics. They—they’re not as involved with academics. But it’s anything about behaviour. Like you phone them, they get mad at you. They’re on the defensive… And I don’t want to be judgmental, but sometimes I’m thinking, is it because there are deficiencies in your parents, parenting skills? They’re trying to over-compensate and say oh, “Don’t you dare say this to my child.” And kind of like, I’m thinking of one family that we have right now. Like her son, every, almost every day he’s not in the classroom. He’s bolting, running around, leaving. And if we phone, she gets mad at us. “Why you bugging me all the time? My son is not bad. You guys are the ones.” So those situations are tough.

Jasmine describes working in a white school as being constantly under surveillance; parents
monitor teachers to the point where they are “breathing down teachers’ necks.” It is a metaphor that evokes unpleasant images of distrustful parents, but also speaks of power, and specifically of white power. It is the affluent, white parent to whom teachers must answer, the parent who must be taken seriously, and whose affirmation and recognition teachers seek. Jasmine’s assertion that “one thing you do wrong, the parents will be there” speaks to the power of white parents to produce legitimate knowledge about their children’s teachers—they are positioned as knowers of what is right and what is wrong with teachers and with schools. However, when expressed by an Aboriginal parent, displeasure or discontentment with the school is not taken seriously, or as demonstrated by Rock in the next section, is disregarded entirely. Jasmine exercises power as she positions the concerns and displeasure of Aboriginal parents as stemming from their parental inadequacies. This rhetorical manoeuver revokes the Aboriginal mother’s potential to communicate in meaningful ways with Jasmine; an essentializing discourse of deficiency casts her communicative attempts as illegitimate.

In the following quote, Jasmine describes another confrontation with an Aboriginal parent who is concerned about her daughter being bullied. Jasmine produces her as “overprotective”; yet coming from an Aboriginal mother, this overprotectiveness is not recognized within the terms of an involved and concerned parent:

One girl was being bullied, I guess at recess, and there was a whole group of girls and they said, “Oh we are just fighting you know for fun.” And I explained to them—we had a talking circle, and we dealt with it…I got a phone call by the end of the day from this girl’s mom, so mad at me: “Why didn’t you call me?” Like here I’m thinking, you know, if I have to call every student that I deal with, like I don’t have the time. (So she did want to talk to you?) Like she says: “Why didn’t you, you should have phoned me and told me that my child was bullied”. (Oh I see). So I said to her, “I’m sorry, I’ve just come to the office, you know I’ve been busy, but did you talk to your child and ask? I have dealt with it, it’s not like I ignored it.” But I don’t have the time to call every parent—if she’s bleeding, you know, if she was hurt. I would have made that call. But when they just, when it’s verbal bullying, teasing, whatever, then (mhm). Like, I can’t make so many phone calls, right?

Jasmine again delegitimizes the Aboriginal mother’s concern by framing her as overprotective,
which allowed her to dismiss the mother’s question of why she was not contacted sooner. However, of interest here is not only Jasmine dismissal of the parent’s concern, but the assumption that this Aboriginal parent does not pose any threat. This is a stark contrast to the previous example, where Jasmine describes white parents as “breathing down my neck,” a metaphor that places white parents above teachers. Jasmine’s disregard of Aboriginal parents’ concerns, and her knowledge that she need not be threatened by them, make sense in the colonial discourses that frame her particular school; they are well-rehearsed discourses that were familiar to her long before she became a teacher there. Jasmine is able to know herself as reasonable and the Aboriginal parent as unreasonable and irrational. The mother’s concern is also framed as interference in Jasmine’s day; communicating with parents is not perceived as a part of Jasmine’s duties as an administrator. Recall in the first quote that Jasmine describes predominantly white schools as places where teachers are able to go in and “do their job.” I acknowledge that the circumstances of the situations Jasmine describes as “tough” do create difficulty in the everyday work of teachers, and that behavioural challenges are demanding of teachers’ time, emotional energy, and physical stamina. I am mindful that educators continuously negotiate complex social relations with both students and parents who may challenge their skills and leave them perplexed and frustrated. Yet it is normative subjectivities and knowledges, rather than the behaviour of students and parents or teacher stress, that is the subject of this research.

They wouldn’t care anyway.

The following excerpts from Valerie and Rock further exemplifies the material outcomes of subjectivating Aboriginal parents as uncaring about their child’s education. Recall that Rock speaks at length during our interview about his disappointment and displeasure with what he perceives as low expectations for the students in his new school—both socially and academically. In the next chapter, I will elaborate on his perceived differences in disciplinary treatment. Also
recall that the population of Rock’s school is made up of predominantly non-Aboriginal racialized youth, many of whom are new immigrants and whose second language is English. The similarities in the colonial discourses in Rock’s school and schools with predominantly Aboriginal youth again speak to the racialization of the space of the community school, and demonstrate that it is not only the Aboriginal student who is subjected to inferiorizing discourses. At the same time, I argue that it is the association of community school with Aboriginality that invokes the inferiorizing discourses, and that racialized, non-Aboriginal youth would likely be constituted otherwise in mainstream schools. In the following excerpt, Rock explains his disappointment with his colleagues’ expectations of the students in his school, and outlines a confrontation with another colleague on the subject:

I feel that there’s been comments made by administration, other teachers, you know, statements like, oh you know, “These kids, we have to give them time to study at school because they you know, don’t take test outlines home, they don’t study at home. You know, they can’t handle some of the things that are thrown at them by other schools, in terms of academics.” I actually had a confrontation with [another teacher]…I had brought forward some parental concerns. Some parents expressed to me that they wanted more notice for tests. He teaches my students math, I teach some of his students math, so we ability group. But basically, when I confronted him, he said, “These students at our school, they don’t take notices home, they don’t study at home, why do I even send test outlines home?” I said to him, “I don’t have that problem in my classroom. I have multiple copies, and I’m always asking the students if anyone needs another test outline.” But they’re no different than the students that I taught at my other school that are you know, in the more affluent neighborhood. I think some of the staff and some of the administration at this school almost have pigeon-holed, have identified these students as lower socio-economic, and as a result have different expectations on them.

Rock’s discomfort with the behaviour of his colleague—who produces as truth that his students’ parents are not involved and therefore do not deserve quality schooling—disrupts the constitution of Aboriginal parents as uninterested in their children’s academic achievement. Rock attempts to re-constitute his students as apt learners who deserve academically challenging work, and their parents as diligent and involved. Rock also states at a later point that in his current school, “the parents are more supportive. The parents are more grateful for what I am doing.” As Rock stands up to his colleague, he attempts to reinscribe the parents as supportive of their children’s
education by acknowledging the legitimacy of their concerns. In Rock’s refusal to stop sending test outlines home, he is able to disrupt the discourse of uninvolved Aboriginal parents; at the same time, Rock’s colleague resists this disruption and attempts to put both Rock and the parents in their “rightful” places. Rock’s disruption of inferiorizing discourses is misrecognized in his school because his actions are incommensurable with the pervasive discourses of deficiency. While in his previous school, his high expectations and communication with parents made sense and was symbolic of good teaching, this is not so in a community school.

Valerie narrates a story about a First Nations student whose mother called the school very upset because, while her son had apparently missed a large amount of classes since the beginning of the school year and would not be allowed to graduate, she did not find this out until April:

The parent called the school and said, because they had received a note saying your child cannot possibly pass this year (okay) they’re gonna fail, and so she came in and said, “Why is it April and this is the first time I’m getting a phone call! A letter! Like any communication from this school saying that my child is in trouble.” And it created a lot of problems in our school and it was talked about at staff meetings and everything because we had failed as a school, that’s not what you do. But, I think that overall what happened is that that child because of who they were, a First Nations kid that had just come into the school and just chose not to come half the time, but everybody kind of had the attitude that, well they don’t care, their parents don’t care, so nobody did anything, nobody called the parents and said your son is not showing up for school and that, nobody admitted that in the conservation in so many words except our administrator did say we cannot allow this to happen again with any student.

I think if the child had not been First Nations they would have been calling home, absolutely, making every effort to contact the parents, umm, I’m sure of that, I’m positive that’s what would happen (uh hum) yeah (okay).

Valerie also explained that for non-First Nations students, the school follows an absenteeism policy. The possibility of not following the policy was available only in cases involving First Nations youth. As Pollock (2004) argues, “knowing silences…are themselves actions with racializing consequences” (p. 91). Following Pollock’s (2004) frame of analysis, I argue that neglecting to call parents is a knowing silence that accepts the absence of Aboriginal students in schools and forecloses a role for adults in preventing that absence. By choosing not to notice
Aboriginal student absences, teachers are help to make these absences “become a daily phenomenon that ‘went without saying’”—a normalized part of school life” (Pollock, 2004, p. 211, original emphasis).

At a different point in the interview, Valerie says that for “problem high school kids” who are from the reserve, the administration _will_ call their parents if there is an issue at school, and that once this phone call is made the student does not return to the school: “Because a lot of the time the parents get really angry and say well, you know I’m taking my kid out of the school and so they do, and that’s how they get rid of problem high school kids.” Aboriginal students are a problem that a school can “get rid of,” and as this example shows, school discipline makes this possible. It also serves to underline that when a parent is produced as uncaring, their child is then undeserving of a meaningful education. It is important to note that while Valerie sees this practice as wrong, and obviously discriminatory, her own subjugated positioning as a Métis teacher makes it difficult for her to speak out against it. At different points in the interview, Valerie discusses her hesitancy in speaking out about racist practices out of fear of a backlash from her colleagues.

Barb and Melissa also disrupt the assumption that Aboriginal parents do not care about their children’s education. The following is Melissa’s response to my request to describe her students.

Oh yeah, they’re great, they’re awesome, they’re funny, and a lot of them are hardworking and they’re involved in sports. Some of them you know are a little bit disengaged, don’t attend as much as I’d like, some of them have some gaps where learning is concerned and I think that’s an attendance issue more than anything, but they’re really good kids. They come from good families, and you know they’re not afraid to ask for help when they need it and I think that they know that we’re here for them.

Barb describes her community as “very supportive of their kids. Lots of families are very supportive of education. They feel that education is really important and they support their kids in the school.” Barb also attributes parents’ lack of participation in certain school activities, as well as lower attendance among students, to social and economic conditions she calls “barriers,”
therefore rejecting the ideology of individualism. When I ask Barb whether her students feel connected to the school, she says yes, and immediately adds that the families do too.

Oh I sure would like to think so. I think they do. And I think many of our families do too. We still—I still have families that I wish, you know, that if they were more connected, maybe it would make a bigger difference, but we continue to work on it, because that is key. I believe that that’s the heart of everything is building that relationship, and being a support for families...One of the largest barriers for families, and I would say not just Aboriginal families and this—so now I’m looking socio-economic, and I know that that’s not the direction you’re going, but transportation’s a huge barrier, you know? Would they like to come to the school, well yeah, but they have no way to get here. Would they like to take their kids here? Yeah, but they have no way to get them there. And sure, yes, could they take driver training? Oh, it costs fifty bucks. Well yeah, I like it, but I can’t do it.

In Barb’s emphasis that the school is a support system for families, as well as her affirmation of the parents’ connection to the school, the school does not become a replacement for families. Barb refuses to attribute problems such as low school attendance to uncaring parents, and instead recognizes the socio-economic conditions that often limit their participation.

Know the rules.

In the next excerpt, Valerie narrates the consequences of publicly positioning herself as a supporter of Aboriginal students and their parents. Recall that Valerie teaches in a school in a rural town with a predominantly white population and a small percentage of First Nations youth who are bused from a nearby reserve. She describes the school environment as uninviting for the First Nations youth, and says that her colleagues often refer to them as “those students.” Valerie was nevertheless surprised at her colleagues’ displeasure when she broke the social norms of her school surrounding the treatment of Aboriginal parents: when she became aware that one of her Aboriginal students was missing school because the child’s mother was unable to find early-morning childcare, Valerie offered to temporarily provide the childcare herself. Her colleagues let her know that her actions were inappropriate:

Well, I made the mistake of telling some—it got out somehow at school that I had done that—not cool. There were people that were really upset with me for doing that: “You’re not a babysitter, you’re setting a bad example, people are going to start expecting that
we will all do that.” And I’m pretty darn sure that that was their attitude because they’re Natives (wow). That’s how my feeling was, is that, why do you think all the parents will expect this—what parents? I was helping somebody out and her little girl got to come to school, and so did her little boy, by the way, because I did that.

In casting Valerie’s actions as illegitimate, Valerie’s colleagues police the rules of interaction with Aboriginal parents through their strong emotional reactions that effectively prohibit the Aboriginal mother from belonging to the category of concerned parent, and instead position her as a threat. Valerie’s own legitimacy as a teacher is put into question as her colleagues inform her that “babysitting” is not part of her professional requirements. Nevertheless, like Rock, Valerie resists the discursive constraints of her setting; her actions position the Aboriginal mother as concerned about her children’s school attendance. Valerie does not acquiesce to her coworkers and affirms her subjectionhood as teacher-supporter of Aboriginal parents, even if this is misrecognized by her colleagues.

The reaction of Valerie’s colleagues made very clear that she had violated the rules for interacting with Aboriginal parents in her school. Validating what Valerie had done, or at least recognizing it in a positive manner, would have positioned the Aboriginal mother in a way they were not willing to do. Although it was not explicitly stated, it was implied in her colleagues’ reaction that the parents who would start “expecting” teachers to become “babysitters” would be Aboriginal parents. In this instance, the Aboriginal parents are imagined as a threat, and Valerie is positioned as an instigator.

**Section summary.**

This section was concerned with inferiorizing productions of Aboriginal parents and students’ home lives. I argued that discourses that subjectivate Aboriginal parents as unfit are *nationalist* discourses and are thus implicated in the making of abject others and exalted subjects. I demonstrated how educators both participate—and refuse to participate—in the citing of racist
and colonial discourses that produce these subjectivities.

**Conclusions, Contradictions, and Consequences**

This chapter has demonstrated how Aboriginal students, schools with high populations of Aboriginal students, and Aboriginal parents, are subjectivated by chains of inferiorizing discourses inextricable from schooling exclusions such as substandard curriculum and dismissal of parental concerns. Inferiorizing discourses are often enacted through a pastoral power (Foucault, 1982) and manifest as displays of caring, virtuous teachers, the creation of an “us” versus “them” binary, the view of the school as the protector and antidote, and the show of subjugating emotions such as pity and fear. These are all processes predicated on the construction of “those less fortunate” who “need our help” (Smith, 2005, p. 84), and are contemporary iterations of the colonial discourse of bringing salvation and civilization to the colonized.

The discourses in this chapter that exclude Aboriginal parents are demonstrative of the ongoing “constitution of Aboriginal families as a hindrance to the modernizing project that can be traced to the earliest stages of the state and national formation” (Thobani, 2007, p. 197). The exalted subject is a compassionate subject invested in his/her family (Thobani, 2007), and within the regulatory discursive norms of the school, Aboriginal parents are deemed always already outside of the bounds of acceptability. Embedded in educational discourses about parenting is the valorization of parents who are “involved” in very particular ways in their child’s schooling and education, and Aboriginal parents are denied entry into the category of “involved parent” through multiple inferiorizing designations. These findings are consistent with previous research that has documented how “Indigenous families are often perceived by teachers and school administrators as disinterested and uninvolved in their children’s education” (Kaomea, 2012, p. 1). While Kaomea (2012) dispels the myth of Indigenous parental disinterest in school, and my findings accomplish similar work, I have instead emphasized what the inferiorizing productions of
Aboriginal parents accomplishes for the subjectivities of everyone involved. In viewing racism as the construction of subjectivities, I consider the inferiorizing discourses as the deployment of race power and as a nation-building practice. While the production of Aboriginal parents as distrustful is certainly a mechanism through which schools can absolve themselves of the blame for Aboriginal under-education, it is also a mechanism that constructs Aboriginal peoples as undeserving of full citizen status.

The same inferiorizing discourses—specifically those concerning Aboriginal parents and those that produce students’ home lives as containing little or nothing of value—are the means by which teachers such as Dante, Jasmine and Susan profess their deep commitment to their Aboriginal students. The way that teachers are able to see themselves as the superior knowers in relation to their Aboriginal students, who are perceived as lacking, exemplifies the dual process of identity making: “Devaluative representations of Aboriginal peoples allow for the development of a negative reference group against which ‘white’ identity can be defined” (Kline, 1994, p. 456).

The difficulty in disrupting the subject positionings of teachers as compassionate subjects is demonstrated by teachers such as Ryan and Valerie, who are aware of the racial inequality in their schools but fearful of naming it. Complicating this possibility to disrupt the compassionate teacher subject position is that in the context of this study, one can be recognized as a “good” teacher of Aboriginal students not through descriptions of academic accomplishments and scholarly rigour, but through the well-rehearsed narratives of the determined teacher who is committed to meeting the needs of disadvantaged students for whom school is imagined as an escape from their difficult home lives. This explains the tendency for teachers working with Aboriginal students to recite, first and foremost, the social ills in their school community. In applying a framework of space and subjectivities as intertwined (Razack, 2014), it is possible that teachers cite inferiorizing discourses in order to make sense of their own exalted subjectivities
within the space of a school that is marked as degenerate. In other words, teachers cannot imagine their position in such spaces could be anything but that of a saviour, or as one who is there to “help.”

This chapter also suggested teachers’ awareness of the limiting and subjugating effects of taking up a saviour subject position, and a resolve to tell stories that do not produce Aboriginal students as impossible learners, and therefore Aboriginal under-education, as inevitable. Participants such as Barb, Valerie, Robin and Danielle, and all of the other participants at some point in the transcripts—disrupt inferiorizing discourses by telling positive stories that reposition Aboriginal students as learners who matter, and community schools as amazing places full of bright learners and engaged teachers. In doing so, teachers are also repositioning themselves into subject positions different from that of the ubiquitous virtuous saviour or helpers; if they are designated as educators, then their Aboriginal students can be learners, and vice-versa.
Chapter 7
(Threatening) Aboriginal Students: Discipline as Race Power

Through the surveillance, arrest, detention, and brutalizing of Aboriginal peoples, to say nothing of outright murder, colonial power is made tangible. It is the Aboriginal body on which colonial power must first be inscribed. (Razack, 2014, p. 60)

This chapter argues that normalized disciplinary practices of Aboriginal students, particularly Aboriginal male students, are forms of colonial domination that (re)produce these students as lawless and their bodies as states of exception. I understand discipline as a racializing power that “takes on great importance because it serves as the primary means through which symbols of power and authority are perpetuated” (Noguera, 1995, p. 198), and present my argument through participants’ discourses about the over-discipline of Aboriginal students and the normalization of a police presence in school. “[Aboriginal] students’ discursive constitutions of race and subcultural identity are at once censured by the school organization as undesirable and simultaneously deployed as proof of this undesirability” (Youdell, 2003, p. 15). Multiple participants produce as truth that the identity category of Aboriginal (especially male) signals trouble. The narratives participants tell about disciplinary encounters in their schools almost exclusively involve male Aboriginal students. The frequency with which participants name such disciplinary encounters is consistent with research on young offenders demonstrating that most were in trouble at school at a very young age (Corrado & Cohen, 2002), and with research on the over-policing of Aboriginal communities (e.g., Comack, 2012). The excerpts in this chapter point to the assumed need to discipline Aboriginal students and the ensuing production of colonial law as an uncontested terrain.
Critical race theorists tell us that black males “are targets of a certain racial panopticon in schools, which disciplines them harshly for behaviors that would be overlooked for white students” (Leonardo, 2013, p. 19). Here I consider what is accomplished through the over-discipline of Aboriginal male students specifically. Following Tribal critical race theory, I argue that this discipline must be understood within the context of Canada’s ongoing colonial project, one that is both raced and gendered. The over-discipline of Aboriginal students can be theorized as a continuing social practice of nation-building, a practice that maintains what Thobani (2007) argues is an enduring thread in Canada’s foundational narrative—the lawlessness of the native and lawfulness of the settler. Educators are involved in the maintenance of colonial sovereignty at the level of daily life in schools through the citation of discourses that are steeped in the historicity of nation-building, resulting in the “enduring politico-ideological construction of the Indian body as a site of exception to the law” (Thobani, 2007, p. 89). Drawing from Youdell (2003), I argue that race hierarchy is preserved through the discourses of the (imagined) anti-school and aggressive Aboriginal male; this discourse “sustain[s] notions of the [Aboriginal] man’s threat to White masculinities, White femininities and the ‘purity’ of Whiteness” (p. 12). As underlined in the title for this chapter, which is meant as a double entendre, while Aboriginal students are constituted as threatening, I argue it is the Aboriginal students who are threatened by a race power bent on fixing their identities.
The Students Most Likely

I begin this chapter by presenting the discourse of the “already troublesome” Aboriginal student. The choice of the term “already troublesome” is meant to reflect the taken-for-grantedness that Aboriginality at school signals trouble. I explore how Aboriginal students are produced as behaviourally challenged, as well as the students most likely to be “in trouble” at school. I also present the counter discourses of Melissa, Robin and Barb, who disrupt the discourse of troublesome Aboriginal students. Excerpts from Jo, Danielle, Nicole, Valerie, Ryan, Rock, and Susan all suggest that Aboriginal and racialized students are disciplined differently than non-Aboriginal students. The productions of truth that Aboriginal students are disciplined differently are mainly—but not all—accomplished through the stories participants tell about other teachers. In order to situate themselves outside of racist discourses, participants carefully differentiate their own practices from those of the teachers they condemn as unfair—discomfort is expressed at naming the observed disciplinary practices as racism. Participants’ attempts to position themselves outside of certain discourses demonstrates their resistance to the normative and racist discursive fields of their schools, but also their familiarity with these racist discourses and the discourses of innocence and denial. At times participants produce contradictory truths by situating themselves both inside and outside of discourses of racism. As such, the difficulty of knowing how to talk about the racial inequality that participants are well aware of—“in a society that thinks racially but hates to do so” (Pollock, 2004, p. 189)—remains a constant thread.

Be wary of those types.

I begin with excerpts from Susan, which are exceptional. While the majority of participants carefully situate themselves outside of racist discourses, Susan situates herself within
these discourses. In other words, Susan names Aboriginal students as troublesome as opposed to discussing how other teachers produce Aboriginal students as problematic. At different points in the interview, Susan emphasizes her refusal to adhere to what she describes as a climate of low academic expectations for Aboriginal students in her school, insisting that, “A lot of people don’t believe that these students can do what other students can.” “These students” signals the category of Aboriginal, and Susan’s awareness that it is a category laden with substandard expectations. Despite Susan’s affirmations that low expectations are detrimental to the academic success of Aboriginal students, she describes her Aboriginal students as angry, unable to reason or reflect on their behaviour, and coming from homes where discipline is lacking. These descriptions are at odds with dominant notions of proper student behaviour, and consequently, despite Susan’s attempts at different points in the interview to position her Aboriginal students as capable learners, the subject position of learner remains inaccessible to them through discourses that produce them as inherently problematic.

Susan: I have a mixture of students with my Filipino kids and a few others that have come from other countries, and new students to the school…But I say that my classroom is so well-behaved because the kids are new, and they’re not all like First Nations, Métis type kids, so they don’t feed off each other as much. But yeah, they’re a great group of kids.

Amanda: Why do you think there are these differences then [between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students] that you’re seeing?

Susan: I think it might be the way they’re raised at home, possibly…And it just seems like the anger is so much deeper with our First Nations kids. Than I’m used to seeing…

I think, like just I was looking in my classroom, and I know, like some of my other students know how to make some of those better choices. Whereas when my First Nations or my Métis, like I say, with the anger getting in their way so quickly, it’s almost like they can’t figure out why they made that choice, or why they are in trouble now. Whereas so and so does it, and then when I do it, I get in trouble. But when so and so did it, they’ll apologize for it, or they’ll come to the teacher and say, like I hit him because this happened and that happened and the other thing happened. Whereas the First Nations kids will just hit somebody, and punch them, and walk away and think well, done. So I’m not sure if they are really are understanding the difference between taking responsibility for
what they say and do, so they can accept the consequences for their actions, and how to get through that through to them, because honestly I don’t think they understand how that works.

Susan believes her classroom is “so well-behaved” because her students are not all “First Nations or Métis type kids.” Aboriginal students are produced in relation to her non-Aboriginal students, who are what her Aboriginal students are not—apologetic, empathetic, and able to understand their behaviour and reflect on their mistakes. Susan produces her Aboriginal students as angry, and provides this anger as the reason why they have difficulty with self-reflection. By explaining their behaviour as stemming from “the way they’re raised at home,” Susan also produces as true that Aboriginal parents authorize and accept violent behaviour from their children. Thus, the contemporary reiteration of the discourse of the unfit Aboriginal parent resurfaces, and is justified through the “misbehaviour” of Aboriginal students.

**Be tough with them.**

At the time of my interview with Rock, he had recently transferred from a school with predominantly white students to a school with a largely racialized student population. Throughout the interview, Rock expresses feeling frustrated with the different norms and social expectations surrounding student discipline. Rock shares his surprise at “hearing a lot of yelling” coming from teachers, and notices a culture of discipline he describes as “more of a talk down” and “finger shaking” attitude towards “misbehaving” students. He also describes perceiving a lack of meaningful consequences and follow-up actions for students who misbehave, which he attributes to low behavioural expectations. Rock aims to make sense of why the racialized students in his school, who come from a variety of backgrounds including First Nations and Métis, seem to be disciplined more harshly. He believes that a white student is more likely to receive a “gentle
reminder” while a racialized student may receive “an earful” for the same inappropriate behaviour: “I don’t know if there’s this, you know, stereotype with these kids that that’s what they need—you have to be tough with them.” Rock also questions if the ways in which teachers construct Aboriginal students’ parents provides them with the justification to treat Aboriginal students differently:

I would say yeah, there’s some inequality. I’ve heard teachers in the hallway and in the classroom talk about you know, there’s lack of parental involvement with Aboriginal students, and maybe that’s—in a way it gives them permission to treat them differently, because they know that a parent’s not going to be walking in to the school having an issue with it.

The above excerpt makes clear that constituting Aboriginal parents as uncaring legitimizes the denial of their children’s access to fair treatment in school. This non-normative construction, or othering, is necessary for educators to justify why they do not apply the same standards of teaching practices to their racialized students. Also, Rock’s inability to imagine an Aboriginal parent walking into the school and asserting authority is interesting; his statement produces the school as a white space where Aboriginal parents do not have any authority. I will return to this idea in a later excerpt.

Rock also points out that his non-Aboriginal students discipline their Aboriginal classmates. After Rock read over the transcript of our interview that I sent him in order to accomplish the step of member checking, he added the following note:

After our discussion, I got to thinking about how the students in my class exclude the students in my room that are Aboriginal. I’ve made a point of observing more closely than I normally would, and I notice that these students are not included when it comes to choosing partners and groups, that other students in my class talk to these students in a very short, abrupt manner, and that some students even scold these students when they are off task. In other words, I am seeing that there is racism in my own classroom, even after doing an extensive unit on racism.
Rock’s observations illuminate how non-Aboriginal students also deploy race power in the everyday minutiae of schools. White students are also produced through subjectivating discourses of white supremacy; Leonardo (2009a) points out that in schools, white children quickly learn their place in the racial hierarchy: “They begin to know who they are. It does not take long for White children to recognize that the world belongs to them” (p. 235). Indeed, through their disciplining of Aboriginal classmates, the students in Rock’s classroom can experience themselves as exalted subjects in the same way as the adults.

**Chase them down.**

Recall that Danielle, who is Aboriginal, has experience working in numerous school settings with Aboriginal students. When I ask her whether she feels that Aboriginal students are targeted for discipline, she responds by saying, “Absolutely,” and prefaces her response by underlining that she is glad our interview is anonymous—again referencing a social context where racism is not supposed to be named. This assertion also suggests that Danielle fears negative consequences for naming racism, which is unsurprising; in the social context of this study, it is common for white people to commend Aboriginal peoples for not “pulling out the race card” (Schick & St. Denis, 2004). In refusing to name racism, thus protecting the comfort of white people by assuring them their innocence, Aboriginal peoples can gain respectability. Although white people may also gain respectability by refusing to name racism, the irony is that they are more likely to be rewarded for anti-racist initiatives than their racialized counterparts, and less likely to be lambasted (Thomas, 2001). When racialized peoples are apprehensive in naming racism, it is perhaps grounded in a reluctance to risk further subjectivation. In the
following excerpt, Danielle communicates this apprehension to talk about racial discrimination, and elucidates the consequences of over-discipline for Aboriginal youth:

I’m glad this is anonymous (yeah) and I trust that (uh huh). Because absolutely, I think people, Aboriginal students are targeted out and I think they’re targeted and are passed over on opportunities. And I also think they’re targeted and there may be different discipline that’s given…I think it’s really difficult to lose a reputation or change it, if you’re a First Nations student. Like even more difficult, more so…I think often teachers or administrators mistake lack of parental engagement with lack of caring on the parents’ part. And I think that when, if there is the same situation that happened to an Aboriginal or non-Aboriginal, that administrator might phone home and talk to the parent and the parent might deal with the discipline themselves and work it out with the child…I think the same situation, if an administrator tried to phone and didn’t get in contact with someone or there was no phone, and they could not contact or they didn’t know anything about that parent, they might provide that discipline in school and so it would be, it’s just not, it’s not, it’s not fair.

Amanda: Do you have any examples, specific situations that you could remember?

Danielle: Well I think so. I think that you know in schools for example discipline in the hallway, walking down the, walking down the hallway and there’s a couple of boys roughhousing in the hallway that oh, we recognize them from the basketball team—the teacher might walk by. A couple of boys roughhousing in the hallway, First Nation boys are by the student lounge, it’s maybe outside of, or like if it’s during class time they might be sent to the office, like that would be a typical.

At another point during the interview, Danielle expresses the frustration she felt while working in an alternative program that was made up of predominantly Aboriginal students. She explains that when she would send Aboriginal students to the student lounge when they were finished a test, her colleagues did not believe they had permission to be there and would frequently send them back to class. This example, as well as in the excerpt above, serves to demonstrate the precariousness of Aboriginal students’ positioning as learners or “good” students. First, Danielle underlines the difference between the consequences of discipline for an Aboriginal versus a non-Aboriginal student. An Aboriginal student, who is deemed already problematic, must work to prove himself or herself otherwise. Aboriginal students are also involved in constitutive struggles, yet their likely subjection to over-discipline makes it improbable that they will “win” this
struggle; the undoing of what they “already are” can be an impossible endeavour. Danielle also reiterates the discourse of First Nations parents as uncaring, and demonstrates how this constitution works to legitimize the over-discipline of students in school.

The above excerpt indicates that the act of not being where one is “supposed” to be can land an Aboriginal student in the office. As underlined by Danielle, this is a “typical” event. The Aboriginal boys who are sent to the office are hailed as inappropriate students; however, it is not their behaviour that constitutes them as such but rather their treatment. The example of the group of roughhousing white boys who are ignored by teachers shows a discursive silence that reproduces the white boys as not only acceptable, but above the rules of the school. By virtue of their whiteness, non-Aboriginal students cannot “lose” a reputation— their respectability is always guaranteed. Conversely, “all Aboriginal bodies are regulated by the presumption that they are not respectable citizens” (Razack, 2014, p. 57).

Nicole also describes a climate of hyper-surveillance of Aboriginal students in the hallways.

They [Aboriginal students] were not really disruptive in class—I think it was the majority of the stuff that they were like, were apprehended, no that sounds—that they were like, I guess called on, were things in the hallway (okay). So they’d be in the hallway around other youth and so there would be a teacher that would go out and say like, “Where are you supposed to be?” But they wouldn’t ever ask like any of the white kids where they were supposed to be, but they’d sure chase down those Aboriginal kids and say like, “Where are you supposed to be?”

Excerpts from both Danielle and Nicole demonstrate the significance of the everyday practices in which Aboriginal students are constituted as troublesome school subjects. School hallways, or student lounges, might be seen as the “spaces between”; students are not directly under the teacher’s gaze or engaged in academic activities, and may feel less pressure to perform in student-appropriate ways. However, as demonstrated by Danielle and Nicole, Aboriginal students
are never relieved of this pressure. Importantly, it is the response of the teachers that constitutes behaviour as unacceptable, not the behaviour itself. For Aboriginal students, the problem is not what they do, but what they are “always already.”

They’re so disrespectful.

Jo also produces as truth that teachers assume Aboriginal students to be disengaged and disrespectful. She is concerned that this serves as a justification for providing Aboriginal students with a low-quality education. In her words, it is a mentality that is “quite prevalent.” Jo premises the following response by emphasizing her discomfort with talking negatively about her colleagues concerning issues of race. To share her perspectives and to expose her colleagues is to bring to light issues of racism, and Jo risks a backlash in doing so. However, as a white woman, Jo does not risk the same backlash as an Aboriginal person might. Even though Jo is uncomfortable in doing so, she attempts to disrupt the discourse of Aboriginal students as disrespectful by reframing the issues in her school as belonging to the teachers as opposed to the students:

The problem here, if there is a problem, is what we’re doing. But I think that in many, many cases, it’s, and I don’t, and I think people are—and I’m not meaning to sound—well, I am being judgmental, and I do mean to sound that way. I’m not saying that people are not well meaning in some twisted kind of way. But then it becomes an excuse that well they’re not, they’re not doing anything, you know they’re disengaged, they’re disrespectful, they’re whatever, whatever, whatever. And therefore, I don’t have to do anything. You know. That kind of a mentality. It’s quite prevalent.

The previous section brought to light the climate of low expectations in schools with Aboriginal students, which can have the effect of producing teachers as either exceptionally poor or exceptionally good. In the above excerpt, Jo underlines how the production of Aboriginal students as “disrespectful” justifies a dismissive attitude towards them. Whether or not Aboriginal
students are disrespectful in the space of Jo’s school is not something I am able to know; of interest, however, is how this production opens up the possibility to be or not to be a certain kind of teacher. A disrespectful white student would not be produced as undeserving of an education, but educators can be absolved of the responsibility to teach “disrespectful” Aboriginal students as they are already constituted as undeserving. The Aboriginal student, through his or her imagined or real resistance to school, fulfills the expectation of what he or she already is in the eyes of the dominant group.

They’re just Indian kids.

Recall that Valerie teaches in a school where a small number of First Nations students are bused from a nearby reserve. Valerie produces as true that to be a First Nations student in the school is to be automatically cast as an unsuccessful student:

And I don’t feel that there is a real understanding of the First Nations kids, they’re “just Indian kids” and they aren’t, they don’t do well, but they don’t put an effort out, they don’t, like that’s sort of the overarching...

Valerie’s descriptions of her school reference a different set of rules that educators follow when dealing with Aboriginal students, specifically in regards to the application of discipline. Following Youdell (2003), I argue that while teachers in her school may not be deliberately discriminating against Aboriginal students, “those sedimented discourses through which [teachers] classify the student population ensure that these [students] are identified as being a challenge to authority and, therefore, in need of greater surveillance and control” (p. 16). Valerie describes her school and the larger community as unwelcoming towards First Nations students: at one point she attributes her positive relationship with one First Nations student to her belief that she is not “out to get him” like the rest of the teachers on her staff, and references the student’s
constant run-ins with teachers while out on the playground. Valerie presents the differential
treatment of Aboriginal students in her school, as well as the assumption that Aboriginal students
misbehave, as normalized practices that go unquestioned. Valerie also explains that the staff and
students often consider the behaviour of Aboriginal students as aggressive, but Valerie frames this
behaviour as a response to an unwelcoming school environment:

But they’ve [First Nations students] never been accepted, they’ve never mixed with the
other kids. And so they come to our school with kind of an attitude of this when they walk
in, like we’ll get you before you get us, and so then they really aren’t accepted. They have
a bit of attitude and a bit of swagger when they walk down the hall and it’s more—I read
it more as self-defense than it is absolute aggression, but that’s not how it’s seen. It’s seen
as they come in here, they’re aggressive, they’re it, you know…but I think to some degree
it is aggression but it’s, it’s like I believe that it’s more—it comes more from a place of
not, there’s a lot of, it’s not hate or anything. It’s more like they’re afraid of what they’re
going to get and how they’re going to be categorized and stuff, so they just walk in
aggressively to, to get, you know—I’ll get you before you get me, like I’m not gonna be a
wimp here, I’m not gonna get trampled on, I’m gonna walk in here, I’m gonna be this
person, or these people. They hang out in a group.

In describing how “they” come in “here,” Valerie references a boundary that First Nations
students overstep in entering the school; “here” is not their school. Valerie’s descriptions of her
First Nations students call to mind Erica Meiners’s (2007) argument that anger expressed by
racialized youth is often criminalized as opposed to being considered a legitimate response to
exclusionary and racist schooling environments. Similar to how Meiners might understand it,
Valerie perceives the behaviour of Aboriginal students in her school as a form of resistance and a
means of defending their (unwelcomed) presence. Valerie rejects the normative subjectivity of the
Aboriginal students as aggressive, and through her understanding of their behaviour as a natural
response to aggression, she validates their personhood. Valerie’s description of Aboriginal
students’ having a “bit of an attitude and a bit of a swagger” calls to mind how Youdell (2003)
understands male Black students’ citing of irreverence for school through their bodily practice of
slouching; “It appears that the boys’ bodily practices provisionally offset the diminished status—
or even humiliation—with their location in the lowest teaching group” (p. 13). Valerie’s descriptions of the Aboriginal students’ bodily expressions, which constitute them as anti-school, is a theme that surfaces in the next excerpt, as well as in Ryan’s interview. I return to an analysis of this point later in this section.

Get rid of them.

One of several disciplinary incidents involving Aboriginal students that Valerie narrates occurred on the day that our interview took place. She expressed feeling distraught about the incident—a male Aboriginal student (Jason) physically assaulted another male Aboriginal student in the lunchroom—and speaks at length about it. Valerie’s concern with how the incident was handled demonstrates her resistance to the subjectivation of Jason as an angry yet unfeeling child, and her awareness of the consequences this subjectivation:

Valerie: We did finally separate them and [Jason] went and ran away and what, oh it was just terribly, terribly, terribly upsetting to the, especially to his teacher. But immediately the talk in the staff room was, “Well, those kids!” and it wasn’t meaning those welfare kids even, it was meaning those kids like him, and I really felt like, for you know…

Amanda: Is he teased often at school?

Valerie: No, no (no) he’s the tough guy in the classroom, he kind of rules the roost, he’s the cocky little street boy…He’s the one that puts on the big tough guy act (okay) he’s been tossed from pillar to post and he’s tough (okay). But he’s also got a great sense of humour and he’s a very sensitive kid. He’s a child that’s hurting because he’s not wanted, he’s not wanted at home, and he’s not wanted in his foster home and he had recently just found out that he, the teacher said he had just found that he was going to be moving out of his foster home and was supposed to be going back home, so there’s a whole bunch more to the story, right? And she sees that and I see that, but most of the other staff does not.

Amanda: Oh, so he just recently found this out? (Yeah). How recently?

Valerie: Oh just in the last couple of weeks I guess and she said, you know, this temper unfortunately, “Robbie was his victim, but the anger that was coming out of him was because of all of this other stuff.” And the discussion that was happening in the staff room was: “It’s just so sad.” Because it’s a very religious community, “It’s just so sad to, to
think that there would be a child that age that would have so much anger and, what for?” one teacher said. And I’m thinking, um maybe because he’s in the welfare system and he’s sad and he feels unloved and, like there’s so many reasons. But, I don’t know, I just felt sitting there, I felt like, yeah, you know, if he was a little blond, blue-eyed boy you guys would be looking at this way different.

Amanda: What do they think that, what did the teachers think the next step should be to resolve what happened?

Valerie: Umm, they thought that he should just be expelled from school and not allowed to come back.

In the end, Jason was not expelled, but he did end up leaving because of a family situation. Importantly, after the incident Jason expressed to the principal that he “did not belong” in the school and he asked to be sent to an alternative youth facility in another city. This demonstrates that through Jason’s multiple and continued subjectivations as an angry child, as unwanted in the school, as deserving of punishment, and as deserving of suspension or even expulsion, he came to believe these subjectivations as truth. Jason came to internalize that he was not of the school, even though teachers such as Valerie aimed to disrupt inferiorizing discourses about him. At one point in the interview, Valerie points out “they know that they’re, you know, the Indians, the kids call them that,” underlining that school is a space where race calls students every day, and students answer (Leonardo, 2013). Valerie’s narrative also points out the assumed superiority of the religious community that she feels is implicit in the other teachers’ subjection of the event as “just so sad.” Education of Aboriginal peoples was originally a religious endeavour; the assumed superiority and benevolence of the Christian religion justified the founding of residential schools and also shielded them from later scrutiny. At play in Valerie’s narrative is her own reluctance to be critical of the other teacher’s comments, as she is aware of the power that the teacher’s religious identification carries in terms of being absolved any wrongdoing.
Similar to Valerie, Ryan positions himself as a supporter of Aboriginal youth and as concerned about their mistreatment in school. He perceives that the Aboriginal students in his school are often held to low expectations, both academically and socially, and he has observed that a particularly group of Aboriginal male students are targeted for discipline and treated “coercively” by his colleagues. Ryan expresses feeling especially concerned with the practice of telling students not to return to school after a disciplinary incident.

I’ve seen or heard kids saying, kids being told to, don’t come back until you’re, until you’re ready to learn. Don’t come back until you’re with a parent. Like that sentiment, which seems problematic to me. Teachers (okay) who I see doing these really—like telling students to, don’t come back to school unless you have this, or unless you’re with a parent (yeah) like that to me is like that’s—it’s against everything I believe, basically.

The easy dismissal of Aboriginal male students from school is troubling, and can only be understood if the bodies being expelled were never meant to be there in the first place. Once again, the dismissal is justified through the discourse of the uncaring Aboriginal parent. Ryan underlines that several of the students are in foster-care situations, making it likely that many of them do not identify their guardians as their “parents.” The requirement to return to school with a parent, then, plays with expectation, historicity, and stereotypes about Aboriginal parents while reminding the student of the material reality of his situation. But most importantly, implicit in this threat is the assumption that Aboriginal parents will not return to school with the student.

**School just isn’t their place.**

Ryan expresses worry that the majority of his current students will not complete high school. I questioned Ryan as to why he believes these students will not finish high school, and the excerpts below represent his attempts to articulate his complicated feelings on the issue:

Ryan: Well, because they—because they’re treated badly by the teachers. This one kid who I have a really healthy relationship with, he’s a big guy for grade eight (uh hum).
Like he’s, he’s almost an adult-sized individual and he has been assessed with a learning disability, so school is hard in general. Like taking notes is not, he’s not—we did, we did like grade eight has standardized testing which is problematic anyways. He came back—as a grade eight student he was writing and reading at a grade three level. So according to this standardized test, so he’s somewhere in multiple levels behind and he’s expressed that it has been frustrating to do writing stuff. He is the kind of guy who like if you are directly confrontational about doing something, you’re not doing something it doesn’t work that well, he gets angry, that’s his response. Umm he, so you learn how to deal with it but you only learn by him being relational…

Amanda: I am curious why that particular student came to mind.

Ryan: Well like, I don’t know, like he’s, he’s obviously Aboriginal like he, he doesn’t like to make eye contact with teachers, like it’s just a number of these things where you’re like you know like, I don’t know…And like, with that particular student, like if he, if there’s a teacher who really—like big kids can be intimidating as a teacher, you know, because they’re just physically large, and you’re like there’s no way, there’s no, I’m not just bigger, I’m an authority, it’s like this is, he’s a full grown person—so it’s like there’s this perception so if he umm I don’t know—I don’t want to call the teachers racist, but he looks just like a, like a—like he can be troublesome kid, like…I don’t know his story (uh hum) umm but stressors make it harder and family stress makes it harder because you bring that school. You bring your life, you bring your family’s stress to school and like if the student has that stress and they’re more edgy at school perhaps they’re more likely like to be a little bit more defiant or a little bit less you know even reasonably compliant. Like they’re just, they have other stuff going on that bubbles over and unfortunately schools aren’t always a place for that, that is capable of dealing with it—or that is at the moment—although [they] could be you know.

Ryan is careful to locate himself outside of the discourses that deem this particular student a non-learner and a “troublesome kid.” He is very uncomfortable with naming the reason why he predicts this student will be unsuccessful in high school, yet Ryan produces as truth that the student’s Aboriginality, gender, and size have already produced him as “troublesome.” The last excerpt exemplifies how Aboriginal students who are in foster care—and thus more likely to be experiencing family stressors—risk being subjectivated as unwilling learners if they bring their stressors to school, as schools are generally intolerant of the expression of feeling from students.

Ryan attempts to disrupt the discourses that deem this particular student a non-learner and a troublesome kid, thus opening up the possibilities for who belongs in school. Ryan is well
aware that to be “obviously Aboriginal” is to belong to a category laden with negative expectations that are incommensurable with the normative expectations of student appearance and behaviour. Race is understood as “a discrete and authentic marker of identity” (Youdell, 2003, p. 8), and it is implied that the Aboriginal identity is undesirable. Youdell (2011) argues that although “a subject can be hailed in multiple ways at once, if these are incompatible there are likely to be consequences” (p. 81). Ryan’s description of the student as prone to anger and needing to be spoken to in a specific, “relational” way, is salient. Like Susan, Ryan locates the problem of his student’s anger as stemming from his home life, but unlike Susan, he produces this anger as also stemming from the student’s inability to conform to unreasonable school expectations.

In the last excerpt, Ryan’s statement that “schools aren’t always a place for that…Although [they] could be” speaks to how students living with the multitudinous effects of colonization, including those living in foster care, are irreconcilable with the “good” student identities valued in schools. Ryan is aware of this, as he produces as true that the time spent in his own classroom is not adequate for a lot of his students to “get it, to cope, to deal”—in other words, to perform a student identity that conforms to those valued at school. Despite his own reconstitution of male Aboriginal students as students and learners, he assumes that these students are incapable of behaving in the more student-appropriate ways valued by other teachers. Ryan’s primary predictor of student graduation is not the student’s behaviour, but the student’s race. Although Ryan is willing to “forgo the school’s usual expectations of deportment” (Youdell, 2003, p. 14), he produces as true that “in another teaching context…such bodily practices would be designated so anti-school that they would constitute the students as undesirable” (Youdell, 2003, p. 14).
The fact that participants almost exclusively speak of disciplinary incidents involving Aboriginal male students demands further analysis, as does the bodily expressions of these students noted by Valerie and Ryan. Aboriginal males’ enactment of hyper-masculinities allows teachers to justify their banishment from learner status, “because in school discourse the student-learner is intrinsically child, passive, and, perhaps, feminine” (Youdell, 2006a, p. 103).

In school discourses the good male body is the instrument of the mind of the rational, Cartesian man who has subdued the body through its displacement onto woman and its taming through education and/or godliness. The bad male body, then, is the untamed and sexualised force that compels the ungodly, irrational, and uneducated man. Constitutions of these bodies deploy the historicity of colonial, eugenicist, and industrialist discourses that demand the management and correction of mass urban populations, the colonised, and the enslaved. As Foucault (1990) has suggested and Hunter (1996) has explored, the cultivation of the good body and the correction of the bad body have become a key task of schooling. (Youdell, 2006a, p. 110)

Drawing from Youdell (2011), I suggest that part of the problem is that Aboriginal masculinity, both bodily and spoken, is “unwelcome in mainstream schools, and at odds with dominant notions of proper student behaviour” (p. 90). Youdell (2011) contends that the “lack of fit” between the performance of masculinity and normative student behaviour may underpin boys’ trajectories into alternative schools. However, for Aboriginal students, this lack of fit serves a larger colonizing function. Hyper-masculine Aboriginal students pose a double-threat: they “simultaneously cite the bodily dispositions of entitled, confident, anti-authoritarian, adult, masculinity…[and] present a tacit challenge to the authoritative, adult masculinity of the teacher” (Youdell, 2006a, p. 104). Their high-status masculine identities are denied as Aboriginal male
students are “constituted as student child and forced to submit to the authority of the teacher-adult” (Youdell, 2003, p. 18). When race is added in to the equation, the threat is to a white masculinity, as well as to white femininities and the purity of whiteness (Youdell, 2003). As I have demonstrated throughout this chapter, this threat to white identity is such that it is insufficient to hail Aboriginal students as unacceptable learners and anti-school; they must be ejected in order to recuperate a whiteness that is imagined as under siege, in order that “the abject beings are removed from white space to places more in keeping with who they have been presumed to be from the very start” (C. Schick, personal communication, October 31, 2014).

Youdell (2003) also points out that defiant identities are often the only ones available to minority students, whose subjectivities are written on their bodies and not simply a consequence of their actions: “In a racialised school context, students know, at least implicitly, that their [Aboriginality] renders them undesirable learners” (Youdell, 2003, p. 17). Applying Youdell’s (2003) analysis of Black students’ constitutions of self and relationships with the school, I argue it is likely that Aboriginal students’ “subcultural identities play a significant role in the maintenance of their self-esteem or even their sense of self. These [Aboriginal] students cannot be ‘pro’ the very institution they understand themselves to be subjugated by…without substantial cost” (p. 17). This suggests that performative constitutions “present something of a double-bind to [Aboriginal] students”: if they want the protection of an Aboriginal subcultural identity, the cost is the “concomitant constitution of an inherently challenging learner identity” (Youdell, 2003, p. 17).
**Don’t you dare call us racist.**

Ryan is very uncomfortable in naming the exclusionary practices in his school as racism. As the excerpt below demonstrates, Ryan is very careful not to “judge” the teachers, which would be to position them as “bad” or “racist” teachers. Even though Ryan does not condone the specific actions of the teacher, he leaves intact the assumption that the teachers in his school are “good” teachers and attributes their actions to a lack of knowledge. Ryan implicitly knows the system is unfair, but can hardly construct a sentence in the following example because of what he cannot say. Thinking about racism would require a rethinking of why Aboriginal students are treated badly, which Ryan is reluctant to do.

I don’t want it to be [racism]. You know like it’s weird, I don’t, I don’t want that to have been a factor but I think it is, and like, and it’s, I don’t know. Like I kind of even don’t want to think it’s intentional and I don’t know. I don’t know if it is—it’s, I think there’s this weird like—it is racism but it’s like people they, I don’t know. It’s hard to call, you don’t—I don’t want to call anyone racist you know. It’s just such an unflattering thing. It’s uncomfortable to say that, but it’s kind of that’s what it is (uh hum).

Valerie also grapples with whether to fully accept as truth that the differential treatment of Aboriginal students is informed by race, even though she is aware of the different meanings that are made of Aboriginal and white students’ behaviour.

I think, I don’t know if it’s, it’s racially, if it’s so much racial as the kids that often happen to be misbehaving [are First Nations]…So, whether that’s a racial thing or it just happens to be that he is First Nations but he’s also in trouble a lot [Jason]. Those other two young girls are fine, upstanding citizens. You know, they’re, they do all the right things, and say all the right things, but they’re conniving and sneaky as all get out.

Towards the end of the interview, after listening to numerous examples of differential treatment of Aboriginal youth in her school, I ask Valerie why she is hesitant to name the practices as racist, to which she responds:

I suppose it’s partly because I’ve heard people say, oh yeah, well they blame it all on racism. Like they—people don’t like to hear, people in general don’t like to hear something labeled as racist. They’re sick and tired of hearing that term, I think. Although
I think it’s very real and its applies, I think a lot of people just don’t want to hear it and I, I don’t want to be, umm, bandying it around as if it’s, you know, but it—yeah I guess it really is, call it what it is.

Valerie and Ryan’s apprehensiveness towards naming the differential discipline suggests an awareness of the risk of backlash in naming racism, which I have already discussed in an earlier section. In the social context of the study, even naming racism is considered taboo and risks evoking fury (Razack, 1998; Schick & St. Denis, 2005). But again, this fury is not equally unleashed; “For people of colour daring to name and challenge racism in workplace, reprisals are often swift and brutal, crude as well as subtle” (Thomas, 2001, p. 207). Razack (1998) reminds us that “Canadians are outraged when racism, particularly indirect racism, is named, as it is not supposed to exist” (p. 60, emphasis added). While naming racism at school would disrupt the assumed neutrality of their colleagues and the assumption that First Nations students are singularly to blame for problems at school, larger social and psychic functions are achieved by this taboo as well. Recall Thobani’s (2007) assertion that respect for diversity and cultural pluralism and goodwill towards Aboriginal peoples are emblematic of the Canadian national character. Naming race power as it is deployed by teachers is to call into question Canadian identity and the assumed exalted subjecthood of teachers.

It’s always fair.

Melissa, Robin, and Barb produce their Aboriginal students in ways that disrupts taken-for-granted assumptions of Aboriginal students as behaviourally challenged. Robin emphasizes that in her school “it’s all about respect… I mean, are you being respectful to the school, are you being respectful to the community? Are you being respectful to the other people around you?” Melissa explains that consequences are meaningful and never about punishment. If her students
behave inappropriately, they are held to high expectations in order to “make it right.” Importantly, Melissa underlines that her “kids make mistakes.” This right to make mistakes and to be forgiven for them disrupts the discourse of Aboriginal students as unfeeling and impervious to discipline.

They usually have to make it right, you know, apologize or explain the situation and likely, you know, it’s not going to happen again kind of thing. And we expect that with the kids too. When you’re on the playground and you punch somebody well you have to go to that person and say I’m sorry for what I did and it’s not going to happen again. We try and get them to just, what’s the word, kind of live up to the expectation of what’s appropriate behaviour and what they’re supposed to do and what they know is right. It’s just—kids make mistakes and they have a chance to make it right.

Barb also refuses to take for granted that her Aboriginal students are more prone to misbehaviour at school; she produces them as reasonable learners who make mistakes. However, she also avoids engaging in a discussion about whether Aboriginal students may be targeted for discipline in school by choosing instead to narrate stories of discrimination that happen outside of school.

It’s always fair [discipline] and honestly, we don’t have that many discipline issues in our school. In all honesty, and when they do come up—I’m a girl of three, so you have three chances to make it, you know, to grow, and when you know better, you have to do better, is the rule I live by… A child has to have the opportunity to do better, and to show that they’re learning. Because everybody makes mistakes—they’re kids…

I think the justice system—I think police could fuel that. I think, I don’t know about education. I can only speak from my background…Aboriginal families traditionally do not raise their children with the same kinds of ideas that we do, and personally, I recognize that, you know, that’s fine. So that whole discipline thing, that’s not a—I’ve seen—I’ve had the privilege of knowing lots of Aboriginal kids that are the model of discipline, or are the model of…so that to me, that’s— but discrimination, yes. It saddens me, but yes. And I can give you examples of that. When we take kids on a field trips for example. My school, the one grade went down, and those children were all Aboriginal— well maybe there were two in that class that weren’t, going to a store, and first of all the store owner. I know, because I mean, this is what I feel. I can’t be a hundred percent sure, but first of all, he didn’t think any of them would have any money, and second of all, felt they would shoplift from him. It was very obvious that that was the idea…To say that if there were two children walking down a street at night, probably rightly or wrongly, the Aboriginal kid is going to be the one who is watched closer. I’ve seen it, and um, so yeah. (yeah). Yeah, it is, in the justice system, and I think the number of Aboriginal people in our jails would support that. What would the ratio be? The percentage of Aboriginal people incarcerated be? Seventy percent?
In the first excerpt, Barb produces her Aboriginal students as learners; making mistakes is a part of learning, and she expects that all of her students are capable of engaging in a reflective process that enables them to “move forwards.” In the second excerpt, Barb underlines she has known many Aboriginal students who are the “model of discipline,” thus interrupting the discourse that ties racial identity to expectations of misbehavior. Her response in the second excerpt follows my question of whether she feels Aboriginal students are more likely to be disciplined, and Barb does not engage with the possibility that discrimination against Aboriginal students happens in the space of the school. It is salient that she chooses to avoid discussing this possibility given that she has over thirty years experience teaching in community schools. Such a knowing silence about race (Pollock, 2004) ensures there is no debate about the role of the school in racial discrimination. If teachers say nothing at all, racial discrimination can become a normalized part of school life; it is only through naming something that it can become otherwise. However, Barb is quick to point out how she sees discrimination affecting her Aboriginal students once they leave school. By referencing the incident in the store, the hyper-surveillance of Aboriginal students on the street, and the wider problem of over-incarceration, Barb does produce as truth that race is salient in the lives of her students and in shaping social inequality. But again, in refusing to engage with the possibility that Aboriginal students might be subjected to the same type of hyper-surveillance inside of school, the school—and the teachers inside it—are produced as neutral and innocent. Barb does not take the opportunity to reflect that perhaps, even though in her school the disciplinary practices are always fair, that this may not be the case for Aboriginal students in other schools.
Section summary.

The excerpts in this section have examined the multiple and contradictory ways Aboriginal students are subjectivated through discipline as troublesome, and the examples provided are understood as deployment of technologies of disciplinary power (Foucault, 1979). Several participants are aware of the negative assumptions made about Aboriginal students and aim to produce their students otherwise, creating new possibilities for who their Aboriginal students can be. Examples included Melissa, Robin, and Barb, who refuse to construct their Aboriginal students as different, and set high expectations for their social behaviour; Rock, who takes notice of how his students’ identity markers determine how they are treated by both staff and students; Danielle and Nicole, who know that any type of misbehavior on the part of their Aboriginal students is taken as an affirmation of their already assumed inappropriateness; Jo’s frustration with how assumptions about Aboriginal youth’s behaviour mean the denial of a rigorous education; Valerie, who understands the “angry and aggressive” behaviour of the First Nations students as a natural reaction to an exclusionary environment; and Ryan, who points out that the male Aboriginal students are likely to be mistreated. As I also demonstrated, teachers such as Susan and Jasmine reaffirm discourses of degeneracy about Aboriginal students. The multiple and contradictory subjectivations of Aboriginal students demonstrate that even though educators work towards opening up the possibility for their Aboriginal students to be “good” learners and students, this is always only partially accomplished. Educators negotiate their (re)positioning of Aboriginal students as bright and capable learners within the context of racist, normative expectations of their Aboriginal students and themselves.
Normalizing Police Surveillance

This second section continues to build the argument that school discipline is a technology of othering that positions Aboriginal students outside the bounds of acceptable student status, which is constitutive of their larger positioning as lawless subjects, always outside of settler society. Before turning to a discussion of the broader implications of the above discourses and their ensuing subjectivities, I will present another set of discourses on the topic of police presence in schools. This relates to the larger theme of constituting Aboriginal youth as lawless, mainly through the assumed neutrality and benevolence of the law enforcement, which I argue lays claim to the *lawfulness* of nationality (Thobani, 2007). I examine how participants both accept and resist enduring colonial narratives about the “benign operation of law and order” (Nettlebeck and Smandych, 2010, p. 357) as it pertains to Aboriginal peoples. A considerable strand within “the school to prison pipeline” body of work problematizes police surveillance in schools with high numbers of poor and racialized students (e.g., Farmer, 2010; Meiners, 2007, Payne & Rocco, 2013). Meiners (2007) argues that surveillance in schools speaks an implicit message about which schools and students the public should fear. Police surveillance in the context of this study has not been implemented in the extreme forms that is has taken south of the border, such as in the hiring of security guards and the installation of metal detectors. Instead, in the context of this study, law enforcement in schools most often occurs through the presence of what are known as “community liaison officers,” whose mandate is to provide community outreach and preventative policing. This is thought to “play a critical role in providing our youth with the education and support needed to ensure they have the skills and confidence to rise above negative circumstances and make positive, responsibility [sic] choices” (Royal Canadian Mounted Police, 2012, para. 1). Police presence in schools reflects “the contemporary criminal justice system within the school
environment” (Farmer, 2010, p. 367). In Foucauldian terms, police presence also acts as self-surveillance that operates as a form of social control. The discourses in the following excerpts are steeped in the historicity of white settler systems of law imposed on Aboriginal peoples, a history I presented in Chapter Two. Recall in Chapter Two the work of Thobani (2007), who argues that the law is not racist, but rather, a regime of racial power.

Comack (2012) argues that contemporary police forces in Canadian society play a similar role to that of the Northwest Mounted Police in the colonial project of managing and containing “problem populations” (p. 88)—that is, they are charged to maintain a particular social order that does not serve Aboriginal peoples. “This is especially the case in the urban centers of the Prairie provinces. It falls to the police as ‘reproducers of order’ to devote their considerable resources of that objective. In their surveillance of the racialized spaces of the inner city, police come to define Aboriginal people as ‘troublesome’ and therefore in need of control” (Comack, 2012, p. 88). In encounters with the police, Aboriginal peoples frequently report “racist, sexist, and disrespectful language, and physical violence and assaults, and drop offs and Starlight tours” (Comack, 2012, p. 221).  

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12 The Starlight tours refer to a series of freezing murders of Aboriginal men by white members of the Saskatoon police force. The murder victims, who died of hypothermia, include Rodney Naistus, Lawrence Wegner, and Neil Stonechild. Rodney Naistus and Lawrence Wegner died in 2000 and their bodies were discovered on the outskirts of Saskatoon. Inquests into their deaths in 2001 and 2002 were unable to determine the circumstances. Neil Stonechild's body was found in 1990 in a field outside Saskatoon, and a 2003 inquest was not able to determine the circumstances that led to his death. In January 2000, Darrel Night was dropped off on the outskirts of Saskatoon but was able to survive. The two officers involved were convicted and sentenced to eight months in prison. The initial response from the Saskatoon police was that these were isolated incidents, but Police Chief Russell Sabo admitted that dumping Aboriginal peoples outside of the city was a practice that may have been going on since the 1970s. (See Comack, 2012, pp. 115–151, for a detailed synopsis of the Starlight tours)
There’s no reason for their distrust.

In the following series of excerpts, Lana, Jo, and Susan (white women), Dante (a Southeast Asian man), and Danielle (a First Nations woman) produce the presence of law enforcement in schools as a positive and commonsensical solution to the over-incarceration of Aboriginal youth. Subsequently, I present excerpts from Nicole and Robin, who view a police presence in schools as an ironic solution given the racism in the police force. This irony can only be understood in consideration of “the historic tension that exists between Aboriginal peoples and the RCMP, originating in the fear of Aboriginal peoples and a documented over-policing (arrests, charges, and so on) as well as under-policing (failure to provide services when needed)” (Razack, 2014, p. 56). “The fear of the law enforcement and white racism with which Aboriginal peoples live” (Green, 2011, p. 239) may account for why participants’ students are distrustful of police officers. At the same time, as I will demonstrate, law enforcement in schools is mostly produced as unproblematic and inherently good.

In the following excerpt, Lana responds to the question of how schools might work to prevent Aboriginal youth from coming in to contact with the justice system. In addition to providing more extra-curricular activities, she names a program that encourages Aboriginal students to see police officers in a positive light by having a police officer take them shopping at Christmas time for a family gift:

I’d like to think that school would work from a preventative end, and trying different ways to help students, whether it’s through education and just social things to you know, help find and show them a different path…We’ve had things like “Shop with Cop.” (What’s that?) Shop with cop, the program is a great idea…Because they wanted to find a way for kids at risk, maybe moving in to like gangs, and stuff like that, to have positive experiences with police officers, to see them in good lights. And there, this one simple thing would be to have the police go, take them shopping for family Christmas gifts at Christmas time. [Teachers are asked] to think of any students in [their] class, or families, who would benefit from this. And then basically the idea is that you’re looking for kids
that may be at risk in some way, and then giving them an experience that’s a positive one with the police.

Despite Lana’s implicit understanding that Aboriginal youth have indeed had negative experiences with police officers, Lana locates the problem within Aboriginal youth, and positions them as in need of unlearning their assumptions about police as opposed to police needing to end the negative experiences that inform Aboriginal youth’s distrust. Lana also produces youth’s free time as dangerous and feels that schools could provide better options than what is available to them at home, citing a discourse of Aboriginal students’ homes as risky spaces.

Jo also states the importance of having police officers in her school to develop positive relationships with students, and, like Lana, she produces the students, and not the police officers, as benefitting from such contact. When I asked Jo whether law enforcement has ever been called to her schools for any reason, she expresses disappointment that there is no longer money allocated to school resource officers. In her past experiences, she felt that it provided students with a positive relationship with police officers, something that was “a really good thing”:

When I was at St. Abigail, we had two resource officers that were in our school at least once a week. The two of them would come in, they’d go into the classrooms—one of them was just the biggest pest, and you would just hope that Fred wasn’t coming, but just—into the classrooms, talked with the kids, you know they called them Fred and George, and just, you know, having that positive relationship, and I think we have done a disservice to our kids by not having budgets for that. Because I think it was really a good thing.

Jo also shared a story about one of her students who asked her if she could arrange for a police officer to come into the class because he would like to ask him some questions about being a police officer. Jo explained how the family of this student, an Aboriginal male, is known to have gang affiliation, and she therefore saw his curiosity as positive. Like Lana, Jo feels that the likelihood of joining a gang might be reduced through a relationship with a police officer, and the
relationships that Jo wishes for her students to develop with police officers are produced as beneficial for the students, rather than the police.

Susan lamented that while there was a community resource officer in her previous school, there wasn’t one in her current school with a predominantly Aboriginal population. While Susan constitutes students’ discomfort with police as irrational and produces the need for Aboriginal youth to develop trust in police, rather than for police to be trustworthy, she also sees their presence as serving a disciplinary function. For Susan, the lack of a police presence, given the Aboriginality of her students, does not make sense:

Susan: But here, no police liaison. No police seen around here, at all. And unless they have their meeting here (Oh, I see)…So I even questioned—I said, “Why is there no police liaison here?” Like there should be, a police, a uniformed police officer walking the halls, and walking outside, and getting to these kids, and there’s no one.

Amanda: What do you think the purpose—like what would that serve? Why do you think it’s important?

Susan: I think it’s important because knowing that you have those people that know the law and they’re there to help you and to support you, and for the kids to know that you know what, if I’m ever in trouble I’m looking for that guy. I think that’s really important that they have a presence. Not just at this school, but at every school. You know, just kids need to be able to know that that’s the safe person that I can go to if I need to. Not the person that’s the bad guy, is going to pull out his gun and shoot me, which is what these kids think. A lot of these kids think. (Yeah, why—do they talk about that?) Some do because they may have had the police show up at their house, or something happen in their neighbourhood, so that they see the police man as the bad guy because he’s trying to restrain somebody, or haul him out of the house, or whatever it is they’re seeing.

Although Susan emphasizes that all schools need police, she is particularly concerned that there aren’t any at this school, walking the halls and “getting to these kids.” The inferred us/them binary positions police officers as white and the students as Aboriginal. Susan misses the opportunity to reflect on the possibility that perhaps the police officers truly have been “bad guys” in the lives of her students. In the inferred binary—“This is what these kids think”—Susan positions Aboriginal students’ knowledge about law enforcement as inferior and without
justification. Whiteness plays out in how Susan imagines her students’ experiences with law enforcement: policemen trying to restrain somebody or “haul” someone out of the house are images that again position the police officer as the innocent enforcer. Imagining law enforcement as inherently good prevents Susan from accepting that students and their families have been treated unjustly at the hands of police. Susan’s own lack of negative experiences with police officers, given her social positioning as a white woman, makes this reflection unlikely.

Danielle also believes that a presence of law enforcement in schools is an important step to reduce the contact of Aboriginal youth with the justice system and cites the same discourse as Jo, Susan and Lana:

Danielle: We actually at Cyan School had police in the school… (Like full-time?) Full-time (Oh). Their office is in the school and it’s not just because the school is violent but it’s like a liaison, like it’s community partnerships.

Amanda: So do you think that—that’s helpful to have that?

Danielle: Depends on who the police officer is (Yeah) because they every year they would change, and so some years there’d be someone who would be knowing kids and talking to kids, and I think it was a positive thing. Because you know like they’re in their office and they have to do their work as well and they might be called out for something, but lots of times they would take breaks and they would be just walking around the school when the breaks were on and visiting with kids. And so breaking down that police are bad—all police officers—you know like just getting to know kids and developing those relationships.

Danielle’s production of police officers in the school as positive, and her belief that “police officers are bad” is a myth that needs debunking, is not unlike what is produced by Jo, Susan and Lana. She also views the school as a space where a positive relationship might happen so long as the police officer is someone who gets to know the kids and talks to them. They should not only be there in the case that they are needed for a disciplinary incident, but also to be a positive presence and to build relationships.
In the next excerpt, Danielle affirms that her students have had negative experiences with police outside of the school, and does not dismiss these experiences in the same manner as Susan. She views the school as a place that could provide students with an alternative, positive experience with police officers:

Amanda: Outside of school, do you think that the youth were having these same types of positive experiences with the police officers?

Danielle: No, not necessarily because I think that you know particularly kids when they’re young, if there’s any type of conflict or violence or anything, police or different agencies have to be called in. At a young age they see them as that’s the one that took my dad away, that’s the one who took my brothers and separated us, that’s the one who, you know—so they’re associating those people with negative experiences and so they’ve never had a positive experience because you don’t—nobody has a positive experience, well very rarely with a police officer (yeah). So here was positive engagement, they can get to know each other, they’d know them by name, they you know it depends on the police officer themselves if they’re, if they’re open and outgoing enough to develop that (uh hum). And I think then you know if a student was in a situation and they needed help they’d have that person to contact…So I think yeah, I think what schools can do as well I think in supporting kids, and staying out of like the justice system is, is bringing in those different agencies and having them in the school so that there is a positive relationship built at a young age.

Again, Danielle imagines the role of police officers in the school similarly to Jo, Susan, and Lana. At the same time, Danielle also produces as truth that a positive experience with a police officer is a rare occurrence. Danielle, Jo, Susan and Lana are all drawing from educational discourses that produce the space of the school as neutral and apolitical, which make it difficult for them to imagine that agents of the law, in the space of the school, might be anything but a positive force. In a neutral space, the mistreatment that their students might be subjected to outside of school cannot occur. As such, the school is also shaped as a protective space.

For Dante, police officers are a commonsensical institution that all of society needs to maintain order:

I think it’s always helpful to bring law enforcement in (yeah?) I think they, there’s a boundary for everything but there’s got to be a hard line somewhere. I think if students
don’t know there’s a hard line they’ll walk over it, like anybody in society, there’s a, there’s a middle path, like there’s a right and there’s a left and, and we need law, we need law and order or society would be crazy, we’d go nuts, so if there is law, there should be law and order and kids need to learn about breaking the law and those consequences, and they’re severe ones if you do.

Dante reiterates traditional legal doctrine, which “asserts that law’s role in society is that of dispensing justice in a neutral, impartial and unbiased fashion [as opposed to] a site in which gender, race and class inequalities are reproduced” (Comack & Balfour, 2004, p. 18). Unlike the female participants cited above, Dante produces the role of the police officer as a disciplinarian, not as a friend. Yet similar to the female participants, Dante assumes that law enforcement is both natural and, importantly, indispensable. A common thread running through all of the excerpts in this section is the belief that a police presence in schools has numerous benefits for students, including an opportunity to have a positive experience with police officers and be convinced that trusting them is in their best interest. Participants’ unconditional acceptance of law enforcement can be understood as the maintenance of a “distinct force of our collective imaginary—our sense of who we are as a nation” (Comack, 2012, p. 66). Even though participants are not referring to the Royal Canadian Mounted Police, of whom criticism is akin to an unpatriotic act (Comack, 2012), their unwillingness to question police suggests that city police officers are similarly constructed as protecting the national interest, and thus immune to criticism.

Just a couple of bad apples.

Nicole and Robin interrupt the discourse of law enforcement as neutral dispensers of justice. They view the assumption that Aboriginal youth are in need of developing trust in police officers as ironic given the rampant racism within the police force that I have mentioned above. Recall that Nicole self-identifies as Aboriginal and Robin as Métis. When Nicole is asked about
the presence of law enforcement in her school, she begins by referencing the documentary *Two Worlds Colliding* (Hubbard, 2004), which tells the story of the murders of Neil Stonechild and Darrell Night, two Aboriginal men left to freeze to death on the outskirts of Saskatoon by city police officers. One of the liaison officers who worked in Nicole’s former school was featured in the documentary, and she believes “he had a really strong knowledge of Aboriginal peoples and a really strong knowledge of this discord between Aboriginal peoples and the police service.” Yet she questions what kind of difference he was making in her school:

I don’t know if he made that much of a difference, but he was certainly there trying to like support Aboriginal students which is really, really nice, just to have him around, have him present…I mean it’s good to know that he had that knowledge but I don’t know if it’s particularly positive for students to be like, see I don’t know, just seeing a police officer? Because there is that difference in our city like there’s that, definite barrier I guess, I don’t know.

Nicole goes on to explain that even though the above officer’s job was not to be arresting people, but his job there was to be a presence…There’s such like, I mean the kids *are so aware* of it, so aware of it (So aware of what?). Aware of this difference between…and this dysfunction between the police and Aboriginal people.

Nicole troubles the version of truth that law enforcement in school serves an important purpose, and she uses the metaphor of a barrier when referring to the division between Aboriginal peoples and law enforcement outside of the schools. In this way, Nicole resists the de-contextualizing that takes place in the discourses in the first section of this chapter. In her use of the term “dysfunction,” Nicole refers to the frequent abuse that Aboriginal peoples are subjected to by law enforcement. Given this relationship, a police presence is a reductive and counterproductive solution to high rates of youth contact with the justice system. In the following excerpts, Nicole shares experiences that have led her to trouble the neutrality of the law and to understand it as a racializing institution. When Nicole taught at an alternative school with predominantly Aboriginal students—a school she described at one point as a “holding cell”—her Aboriginal
students shared stories with her about constantly being pulled over by police officers. She addresses the issue of racism in the police force in her curriculum:

I teach it every year, I teach the start of that book [Just Another Indian]\(^\text{13}\) because it’s so meaningful for kids to understand that we have, that there is a *massive problem with racism* in our city and, and for the kids to be aware. Like I mean, you might feel safe over here in Oak Ridge, but there are a lot of people in our city that don’t feel comfortable around the police. But yeah, they [former students] were very, very open about it at, at [alternative school] with their disdain for cops (Oh really?). Oh yeah…I mean I couldn’t relate to it, but they’ve told just terrible stories about being like, mistreated, or having like the police say like terribly racist things to their family or to them. I think they actually get away with saying a lot of like terrible things to people that are never really reported. I really believe that.

Nicole legitimizes what she names as her Aboriginal students’ “disdain” for the police, and she goes as far as including a study of the source of this disdain through the book *Just Another Indian* (Goulding, 2001). This is very different from Susan’s framing in the previous section of Aboriginal students’ experiences with police as necessary interventions for their own protection. Nicole’s legitimization of her students’ disdain resonates with Meiners’s (2007) argument that disenfranchised youth have the right to be hostile, and that “anger is a legitimate response to injustice or violence” that often “gets translated from a critique into a youth with an anger management problem” (p. 6). Meiners (2007) argues, “In the school to prison nexus, the pathologization of dissent is a powerful tool” (p. 6). Nicole’s legitimation of her students’ anger is thus significant because she shifts the problem from Aboriginal peoples to the racism of the police force.

Nicole also contradicts the discourse of “safety” employed by Susan and Danielle. Whereas Susan and Danielle equate the presence of law enforcement with safety, Nicole names a

\(^{13}\) Here Nicole is referring to the book *Just Another Indian: A serial killer and Canada’s indifference* by Warren Goulding, published in 2001. In this book, “Goulding raises disturbing questions about racism in both the police force and the media treatment of John Crawford and his victims. He lays bare the assumptions and attitudes that resulted not only in Crawford's obscurity, but the public dismissal of the deaths of Mary Jane Serloin, Shelley Napope, Eva Taysup, and Calinda Waterhen. The result is a gripping and disquieting book that questions the value a predominantly white society places on aboriginal lives” ([http://www.amazon.ca/Just-Another-Indian-Canadas-Indifference/dp/1894004515](http://www.amazon.ca/Just-Another-Indian-Canadas-Indifference/dp/1894004515)).
space where there is minimal law enforcement as safe—the affluent, predominantly white
neighbourhood of Oak Ridge. Her students’ experiences underline “the awareness and fear of
white racism with which Aboriginal people live” (Green, 2011, p. 239).

As mentioned in the previous section, Susan’s positionality as a middle-class white
woman makes it unlikely that she would spend time in neighbourhoods of her city that are
heavily policed. Even though Nicole explains that she was brought up in a white
neighbourhood—Nicole was adopted by white parents and she explains that she is rarely in
places where she would be likely to come into contact with the police—Nicole’s shared racial
background with her students make it more likely for them to open up to her about their
experiences, and for her to disrupt the pathologizing assumptions in her school environment.

Robin, who is Métis, also supports a version of truth that names racism as a problem in
law enforcement. Like Nicole, Robin is hopeful—but also skeptical—that a police presence in
schools might bring about meaningful change. Yet Robin, like participants in the previous
section, wants students to understand that police officers are there to “help.” In the following
excerpt, Robin recognizes that her students have had negative interactions with police, and
discusses the unequal power relations between her Aboriginal students and white people:

Robin: They’ve gone through, I mean, a whole lot of their interaction with white people
are you know—police officers and you know, the justice system, the social workers, you
know everybody, that is in power. They see people in power or authority over them as the
white people.

Amanda: And their experiences with teachers and police officers, do you think they’ve
been negative or positive?

Robin: Well, I think they’ve been negative, but I think that now you know with the new
programs that are coming in to our school, and having more police officers coming in to
our school just you know to be there, and hang out and show them that they’re there to
help—I mean, it’s happening. But it’s not going to happen overnight.
In the above excerpt from the beginning of the interview, Robin cites the discourse of Aboriginal youth benefitting from the presence of friendly police officers. In the excerpt below, which is near the end of our interview—a point at which I speculate that Robin may have felt authorized, and perhaps more comfortable, in explicitly naming racism—Robin calls the school program a “start,” but feels that “something big has to happen”:

Oh! I’m going to say that more than 50 percent have seen negative experiences with, with um the police and with social services. Because there’s um, there’s no trust with social services with our parents…I, you know, I don’t think it’s changing. And like I said, I, it’s, I mean, I guess maybe we’re lucky because we do have some Aboriginal police officers in this city (Okay). I think that, I mean, I think that racism and bigotry in the police force is rampant. (Yeah). And you know, like I think it’s a start to bringing this program into the schools, but something big has to happen. And like, I mean I wouldn’t say that the police force is something that the kids trust at all.

Not unlike Jo, Lana, Susan, and Danielle, Robin wants Aboriginal youth in her school to have positive experiences with police officers, and she also wants police officers to be there to help. However, like Nicole, Robin legitimizes her students’ distrust by naming the racism in the police force. Also similar to Nicole, she produces the problem of youth contact with the justice system as one that cannot be solved by having police officers in the school, shifting the problem away from the students and producing it as a larger one of systemic racism within the police force.

In the final pages of this chapter, I trace how educators construct the law as a contested space through questions surrounding cannabis usage. I explore discourses regarding the criminalization of students’ usage of cannabis produced within participants’ sharing of incidents in their schools, and different productions of truth as they relate to the activities of non-Aboriginal youth versus Aboriginal youth. Discourses related to cannabis and other drugs, such as alcohol, are significant for multiple reasons. First, drug arrests are most likely to target racialized communities, and Aboriginal peoples are most likely to feel the consequences of the current government’s crime legislation that has imposed a number of mandatory minimums for
possession of small amounts of drugs (Mallea, 2010). Second, the “pervasive stereotype of Aboriginal peoples as alcoholics and hopeless addicts” (Comack & Balfour, 2004) and the tendency for drug—and particularly alcohol—abuse among non-Aboriginal males to be a normalized display of desirable masculinity (McNinch, 2009) calls for an exploration of the consequences of these framings for all youth. Third, when educators were asked for the reasons law enforcement was brought to their schools, almost every participant said that the police had been called to their school to deal with predominantly male Aboriginal students who brought cannabis to school.

The power to criminalize Aboriginal communities is enabled by settler colonialism and white supremacy. The attendant relationships of domination are inseparable from the very different meanings that are made of the activities of Aboriginal versus non-Aboriginal peoples. The discourses in this chapter, reflective of broader social conversations on the topics of crime and drug use, shed light on taken-for-granted assumptions about who can be made into a criminal, and how this is inseparable from processes of colonialism and racism. The discourses in this section reflect a critical approach to criminality that takes into consideration how “definitions of and prohibitions for crime change over time and across social groups and societies, with little consensus around just what criminal behaviour is or even what constitutes criminal behaviour” (Schissel & Brooks, 2008, p. 6).

Law sees no colour.

I begin with excerpts from Nicole, who points out the ways in which whiteness operates in her non-Aboriginal students’ lives, and specifically, how it shapes their subjectivities by making them feel “invincible” and protecting them from law enforcement. She produces the
racial differences amongst her students as determining their likelihood of being subjected to criminalization. In the next excerpt, Nicole is referencing her current school, where the majority of the student population is white:

> When I think about it, there’s so many kids at the high school where I teach at—I mean, these kids, like they deal drugs right in the hallways, and it just seems like they have way more opportunity to misbehave and they do, but they’re never really—do you know what I mean? They don’t like—they’re out drinking and driving and you know smoking pot, and it’s just so strange (You mean non-Aboriginal students?). Yeah. So it’s like they feel like they’re almost invincible. It’s very seldom that you hear a story about someone, one of the really rich kids that gets, like that’s being hassled by the police, do you know what I mean? It’s way more likely when you’re at a different high school to hear the stories of the kids that say like, I just can’t believe that cop said that or I can’t believe I’m being harassed. Because I do feel like they’re being harassed, I think that (uh hum).

Nicole’s description of her white students feeling “invincible” assumes that her students’ race shapes pivotal moments in their lives, such as the likelihood of coming into contact with a police officer—an encounter that has potentially devastating consequences including police violence and arbitrary arrest. White students can “misbehave” without fear of encountering law enforcement and, in the event that this might happen, it is likely that they can still count on their white skin to cast them in a sympathetic light. Comack and Balfour (2004) present an example of how the activities of white youth compared to Aboriginal youth were portrayed in separate court cases involving similar cases of violence fuelled by alcohol. They point out that the Aboriginal event—a wedding—was described throughout legal documents as a “drinking party” while the white event remained a “birthday party.” The birthday party/drinking party descriptors underline the subjectivating, racializing power of language.

> Give the kid the boot.

Like Nicole, Rock is also concerned that the activities of Aboriginal youth, and specifically the usage of cannabis, are more likely to be criminalized. He also disrupts the
normative discourses that frame drug use by Aboriginal youth—particularly in regards to alcohol and cannabis—as different from drug use by non-Aboriginal students. Rock cites the dominant assumption in his social context that drug abuse is a problem belonging to Aboriginal communities and counters such versions of truth with one that refuses to locate drug abuse as solely belonging to Aboriginal communities:

Things like that [students bringing drugs into the school] happen in all schools. But people are quick to point out that you know, that it’s Aboriginal people or community schools are bringing—you know that, there’s that dimension, you know. It was pointed out quickly at our school that it was an Aboriginal student that had brought the drugs in.

In the above citation, Rock references a recent incident in his school where an Aboriginal student was caught with a small amount of cannabis. The quick association that was made between the incident and the student’s Aboriginality ensures that the student’s race is understood as explanation for his drug use. For a white student, race would not be mentioned or considered relevant. Rock remarks that there was talk amongst the staff that the Aboriginal student should be expelled, but that the administrator refused to expel him. Rock went on to discuss the irony of one teacher who wanted this student to be expelled over the cannabis incident yet openly discussed his support of his own son’s underage drinking:

The same teacher that made these comments—that the kid was supposed to be gone last year, our principal shouldn’t have given him a second chance, and give him the boot, and blah, blah, blah, you know will turn around and talk about how his son is underage and his hockey team, if they win this tournament, they’re going to have a party and get a keg, like you know.

Even though Rock does not see cannabis use as positive, he does not view it as something that should warrant expulsion. Rock also disrupts dominant educational discourses on drugs and drug education that separate drug usage and alcohol usage; for example, Canada’s National Anti-Drug Strategy (NADS) omits alcohol in their campaign to combat drug use amongst teenagers (Geddes, 2010). This is a deceptive and inaccurate omission considering that alcohol is the most
common drug used by teenagers, that one third of young drinkers binge-drink at a hazardous level (Canadian Centre for Substance Abuse, 2007), and that alcohol abuse causes the greatest harms of any drug in Canadian society (Mallea, 2010).

In the excerpt below, Rock’s attempts to reconstitute the youth who produced as problematic by other teachers by describing how the student is capable of performing in “good student”—specific ways.

I think schools need to maybe take a look at the bigger picture. Yeah, I think it’s something that’s serious [bringing cannabis to school] and you know unfortunate that he’s using drugs. But the kid came to me last week, into my classroom and was very polite, asked if he could borrow some scissors for a project. And he brought them back and he was, “Oh thanks Mr. so and so.” I see some good things in this youth whereas some teachers are just like, okay, well, give the kid the boot. You know. Send him to a different school.

Rock narrates a different encounter with the student one day at recess. Enforcing the school policy of no MP3 players at school, Rock took away the student’s player and told the student he would need to talk to the principal about reclaiming it:

In a way he’s a very respectful kid. He never put up a fight and he never said anything disrespectful. He took ownership of his behavior. You know like he, there’s a lot of positives towards this youth but as soon as (.) As soon as there’s drugs involved you know there’s some white teachers that are like, “Give the kid the boot.” We don’t need him in our school.

Rock resists dominant discourses that demonize cannabis usage as legitimize over-disciplining Aboriginal students. Consequently, he opens up new possibilities for who his learners can be. At the same time, Rock’s descriptions of the student as capable of performing student-specific behaviours continues to constrain just who can be said to belong in the category of “good student.” Also significant is Rock’s description of the youth as “taking ownership” for breaking the school rule; as I will discuss later, Rock’s perspectives on school discipline take into account students’ capacity for intellectual reasoning and understanding of their own behaviour.
Ryan also rejects the criminalization of youth who smoke cannabis and bring it to school. He recounts the story of a group of his students, a group of Aboriginal males, who smoked cannabis before going swimming at a class outing. After the incident, a meeting was held with the parents, the principal, and the involved teachers. Ryan describes what was discussed during the meeting:

And so they talked about what happened, who supplied the drugs, what like the consequences of that and then also the kind of broken trust. And that’s what the main thing is—we’re in a relationship. We have to trust you because we’re doing these higher risk things like swimming, and if you make these choices it’s harder for us to trust you, to take you out on these trips to do these things. We want you to be here, you’re part of our group, now you have to help rebuild that trust, rebuild that relationship so that if we ask you to do something you’re going to do it, and you’re not going to like, if you’re home for lunch you’re not going to make that choice. So it’s an ongoing thing and there’s going to be ongoing discussions about how, like how we’re perceiving each other and working together.

Ryan produces his Aboriginal students as having the intellectual capacity to reflect on their behaviour. The problem is framed as one of broken trust and making a poor choice, as well as an opportunity for a critical reflection. At another point in the interview, Ryan states that had a different group of teachers dealt with the situation, there may have been more severe consequences. Ryan, like Rock, produces himself as different from his colleagues in relation to his views on cannabis usage.

Jo also produces her views on cannabis as being at odds with those of her colleagues. Like Ryan she may not condone the cannabis use but does not necessarily agree that it should be an illegal substance that calls for criminalization. Jo’s struggle to decide what consequences should be in order for doing something “illegal” inside the school can be attributed to the disciplinarian role that teachers often feel pressured to perform. In prevailing discourses of teaching, it is inappropriate, if not unrecognizable, for teachers to refuse to uphold greater society’s rules of law, especially if Aboriginal students are involved.
The above counter-discourses on the criminalization of cannabis users are significant because they are at odds with the federal government’s recent changes to crime legislation that includes mandatory minimums for cannabis possession. Critics predict the disproportionately racialized composition of Canada’s prison population will worsen as a result of the crime legislation passed in March 2012. Included in a long list of stiffer penalties in Bill C-10, otherwise known as the *Safe Streets and Communities Act*, is the creation of more criminal offences, many more mandatory minimums, and the abolition of statutory release with supervision. The legislation has been strongly opposed by lawyers, judges, correctional officials, police chiefs, medical associations, victims’ advocates, and criminologists, who have pointed to the ineffectiveness of tough measures for decreasing crime and heightening public safety, as well as their tendency to target the poor and racialized. Exactly what does this have to do with schools? During the 1990s, when the prison population in the US grew exponentially, school suspensions and expulsions drastically increased as well; punitive measures in the law and order system seeped into schools, and had devastating consequences for racialized youth (Meiners, 2007). With Canada’s regressive reforms to criminal laws, which shamefully mirror those that have proven to be a failure in the United States (Meiners, 2010a), discourses of resistance like those I present in this chapter are important in ensuring Canadian schools do not follow in the footsteps of the United States. Participants’ resistance to the criminalization of cannabis highlights the social construction of criminality and the reinforcement of racialization through the law.
**Section summary.**

This section has highlighted how Aboriginal students’ distrust of law enforcement becomes located within Aboriginal youth and reduced to a personal prejudice they could overcome if given the opportunity. It is noteworthy that none of the participants pointed out that time spent with Aboriginal students might be an opportunity for police officers to unlearn their own prejudices and stereotypes against a group of people they regularly subject to over-surveillance. This section provided further examples of the over-discipline of Aboriginal male students and their taken-for-granted status as non-learners. I demonstrated how educators both accept and trouble the discourse of law enforcement as inherently good, particularly with respect to cannabis use. I argued that accepting the truth of law enforcement as inherently good reiterates the larger social discourse that blames Aboriginal peoples for their distrust of the police system and locates the problem of police contact within Aboriginal peoples. More specifically, it reduces this distrust to a problem of character, and produces Aboriginal students as lawless and therefore outside of settler society.

I have also touched upon the different ways in which participants’ positionalities shape their understandings of the law. Recall that both Dante, who is Southeast Asian, and Danielle, who is First Nations, also miss the opportunity to reflect on the irony of positioning Aboriginal youth as in need of developing trust in police officers. As white females, Lana, Jo and Susan have the privilege of being seen as “particularly deserving of protection by society” (Comack & Balfour, 2004, p. 89). Their white positioning makes it difficult for them to recognize how race shapes the nature of police interactions, and to imagine the law as a site where multiple forms of oppression play out. While they want their Aboriginal students to see police officers in a positive light and to experience the same safety that law enforcement may indeed represent and provide
for themselves and their own families, meaningful change is forestalled when the problem is
reduced to a lack of trust and misunderstanding displayed by Aboriginal peoples. The truth
production that law enforcement is inherently unproblematic precludes the possibility for a
meaningful analysis of the racism and colonialism at play in Aboriginal contact with police, and
presents the problem as one belonging to Aboriginal youth. The larger consequence of this
discourse is that educators are complicit in “the law as a regime of racial power” (Thobani,
2007), which I elaborate on further in the conclusion to this chapter.

Conclusions, Contradictions, and Consequences

This chapter has presented popular and non-dominant discourses about Aboriginal
peoples, discipline, and the law, identified across participant transcripts. The common thread
linking the discourses in this chapter is the production of the Aboriginal and the non-Aboriginal
as lawless and lawful, respectively. Considerable attention in the last section was given to the
production of law enforcement as benevolent do-gooders, a subjectivation I argue is a
deployment of racial power that “breath[es] juridical force into the category Canadian while
draining it out of the category Indian, solidifying and fixing their identities as different kinds of
subjects (and objects) of power” (Thobani, 2007, p. 71). Aboriginal peoples are constructed as
“distrustful” of the law—which is effectively transformed into a disavowal of the law, and
Aboriginal peoples are thus constituted of non law-abiding character. Teachers can produce
themselves as embodying the character of the law-abiding national when they do not question the
distrust of their students. Recall in Chapter Two the presentation of Canada’s master narrative,
which takes as its point of departure an essentially law-abiding character (Thobani, 2007).
Thobani (2007) emphasizes that amongst several constant threads in the foundational narrative of
Canadian nationhood—adventure and discovery, wild lands and savage peoples, the overcoming of adversity, perseverance, and ingenuity—that the lawlessness and lawfulness of the natives and the settlers, respectfully, are also fundamental themes in these tales of western civilization.

The Indians were lawless heathens and warring tribes, their societies hardly evolved since the dawn of humanity. They were invested in violent rivalries with each other, they lacked the necessary structures for civilized life and were prone to caprice and deceit. The majority of the settlers, immigrants really, were by and large Christian, law-abiding and industrious, the embodiment of western civilization, goes the story. (p. 66)

Aboriginal peoples then, are already constituted as criminal before any “crime” is committed. Complicating this analysis is the reality of distrust felt by Aboriginal peoples is not baseless; it stems from a long record of abuse they have experienced at the hands of law enforcement (Green, 2011; Razack 2014; Smith, 2005). This includes the freezing murders of Aboriginal men in the city of Saskatoon, as mentioned earlier. An inquiry into the murders suggests the stronghold of the subject position of the benevolent law enforcer; the murders, according to Justice Wright, were a result of cultural misunderstandings between Aboriginal peoples and the police, “rather than the disproportionate power and malice held by those in the dominant community” (Green, 2011, p. 239). Blaming anti-Aboriginal racism instead, Green argues the Aboriginal men “did not die due to a misunderstanding” (p. 239, emphasis added). It was also suggested by Justice Wright, the head of the inquiry into the deaths, that Aboriginal cultural training become mandatory for members of the Saskatoon police force. Learning about the cultural differences of the Other is understood as a solution to the violence perpetrated against them, mirroring the recourse to culturalist theories in educational spheres. Although participants in the excerpts do not specifically discuss culture, a refusal to know and production of difference is accomplished
through discourses that reduce over-incarceration to problems of a personal nature. In this way, “particular individuals [can] be faulted, but the system remain[s] uninterrogated” (Green, 2011, p. 239).

The second salient theme of this chapter was the presentation of the over-discipline of Aboriginal male students and the endemic nature of colonialism (Brayboy, 2005), which provides a starting point for a more complex understanding of the social and discursive accomplishments of this discipline. First, it is also through the enactment of discipline on Aboriginal students that national subjects can come to know themselves as lawful subjects and exalted members of the nation, of a different order of humanity than the Aboriginal person (Thobani, 2007). The over-discipline of Aboriginal students and their taken-for-grantedness as subjects in need of surveillance is a continuing social practice of nation-building. The frequency with which male Aboriginal students are named reflects that colonialism is indeed “inter alia a patriarchal project” (McConaghy, 2000, p. 62, emphasis original). Drawing on McClintock (1995), McConaghy (2000) argues that “colonialism cannot be understood fully without a theory of gender power. Gender dynamics…are fundamental to the maintenance of colonial formations” (p. 63). The reproduction of the institutional power of men continues to be achieved through social practices of discipline in schools, in more ways than one. As evidenced by participants, it is often white males who are bent on disciplining Aboriginal males in schools; not only is their own dominance re-inscribed through such acts of discipline, the identity of the Aboriginal male is undermined. In a patriarchal settler society, the Aboriginal male poses a threat to white male dominance; in school, norms of white masculinity are disrupted by large stature and aggressive behaviour. Because hegemonic white masculinity is similarly performed, the Aboriginal male threatens what is assumed as rightfully belonging to the white male—power and authority. According to Schick
“large size and aggressive behaviour of Aboriginal students disrupts white adult masculine norms; their very presence, regardless of what they do, disrupts norms of white male dominance that threaten male and female teachers alike” (Personal communication, October 31, 2014).

Through the expulsion of Aboriginal students from the space of the school, educators maintain colonial sovereignty at the level of daily life as they wrest and hold control over the resource of the school. Individual and collective identities are also protected: “As a public discourse, disciplining others is...a performative act of community formation in which the community recognizes itself as not other” (Schick, 2014, p. 92). Aboriginal students are automatically constituted as threats when they step into spaces belonging to whites, and their discipline is not only a way of showing them they do not belong in the space of the school, but showing them who they are not—respectable citizens deserving of the resources of the nation-state—and who they really are—the abject other who belongs in degenerate spaces. “Race power” (Leonardo, 2013) is deployed as teachers use discipline to control how subordinated Aboriginal students are known, distinguishing themselves as the knowers, and refusing to know Aboriginal male students as academics. The notion of the Aboriginal male as an academic is an identity at odds with popular settler imaginaries of Aboriginal men that serve colonizing regimes. McKegney (2014) employs the term “masculindians” towards the goal of

[Drawing] attention to the settler North American appetite for depictions of Indigenous men that rehearse hypermasculine stereotypes of the noble savage and the bloodthirsty warrior (as well as their ideological progeny—the ecological medicine man, the corrupt band councillor, and the drunken absentee). (p. 1)
McKegney’s emphasis on the popular stereotypes of Aboriginal men underlines settlers’ refusal to know them otherwise. These limiting ways of being known come in handy when an expulsion from white space needs to be justified. As abject subjects, Aboriginal students are “a risk, a threat and so must be expelled” (Youdell, 2011, p. 42), and their discipline is a response to fears about the loss of white supremacy and white purity. Of course, the Aboriginal student poses no real threat, and so must be imagined as inferior in order to provide the colonizer with an external cause for their fears and expulsion. The discipline of Aboriginal students is a primary means through which schools communicate to Aboriginal peoples, and to the community, that the Aboriginal student in white space is not to be tolerated.
Chapter 8
Conclusion

Summary

This study set out to explore how educators’ normative discourses about learning and school in the Canadian prairies legitimize and make possible the criminalization of Aboriginal youth, and how educators work to disrupt normative discourses in order to reconstitute Aboriginal youth, opening up new possibilities for who can be a learner. The suggestion that educational discourses are connected to Aboriginal students’ trajectories to incarceration disrupts settler colonial nationalist narratives that present Canadians as committed to diversity and good-willed towards Aboriginal peoples, and the meritocratic discourse that schooling presents equal opportunities to every student. As such, this work has followed the imperative of critical race theory to “take apart some of the most intimately held belief systems that define the educational enterprise” (Leonardo, 2013, p. 18). In understanding “space and subjectivity [as] intertwined in a colonial settler context” (Razack, 2014, p. 70), I began this thesis interested in how contemporary dominant discourses produce Aboriginal students in the context of school. In other words, I wanted to know who teachers think Aboriginal students are, and whether the subjectivities pressed upon students are criminalizing subject positions, in the sense that they produce Aboriginal students as dangerous, in need of discipline, punishment, and containment. In this way, I assumed identity markers are key in shaping students’ schooling experiences, and that it is not Aboriginality that is predictive of under-education and criminality, but instead the negative meanings that are made of this identity marker, a process understood as subjectivating power.
I conducted semi-structured interviews with 13 educators—six self-identified as Aboriginal, and seven as non-Aboriginal—working with Aboriginal students across one prairie province. I asked educators to tell me about their schools, their teaching practices, and their students. I posed several questions on Aboriginal under-education and over-incarceration, and the over-discipline of Aboriginal students. I aimed to engage teachers in conversations about racism and found that for the most part, teachers were reluctant to speak on the topic. However, multiple participants spoke at length about the racially discriminatory practices of other teachers.

Following the interviews, I conducted a discourse analysis of the transcribed text, looking for repetitive patterns that revealed the normative discourses that shape and constrain how Aboriginal students, and Aboriginal education generally, are understood in the research context. Guided by my research questions, I identified normative discourses and analyzed how they criminalize Aboriginal students—and in doing so, my question inevitably became whether normative discourses criminalize Aboriginal students. At the outset of this study, I had yet to determine the precise connections that would be made between normative discourses and criminalization. I believed I might find explicitly criminalizing discourses in my analysis—that is, that educators would produce Aboriginal students as violent, in need of containment, and deserving of punishment. This is not what I found. Normative discourses identified across transcripts are not criminalizing discourses, nor are the discourses delineated in the findings understood as causal factors in sending Aboriginal students on a trajectory to incarceration.

Instead, I found that normative discourses about Aboriginal students are exclusionary discourses in that they position Aboriginal students outside of acceptable learner status, and effectively, outside of settler society. This finding is very much in keeping with the colonial history of this geographic and social location. I staked this argument by demonstrating that
subjectivities pressed upon Aboriginal students are not only incommensurable with normative expectations of student behaviour, but also at odds with the imagined qualities and values of citizens of the nation state. The findings began by demonstrating how pervasive culture discourses limit how Aboriginal (under)education can be known: I showed how educators employ culture talk to affirm a commitment to Aboriginal students and to evade considerations of racism in their schools; I argued that culture discourses, through their erasure of racism and construction of difference, are racializing discourses. Next, I explored a set of normative, inferiorizing assumptions about Aboriginal students, the schools they attend, and their parents and families, and linked these subjectivities to substandard pedagogical practices and the denial of a rigorous curriculum. Last, I presented the taken for granted discourse of the over-discipline of Aboriginal male students and the normalization of a police presence in schools, and the larger implications and colonizing significance of the subject position of troublesome student.

Throughout the findings, I included counter-narratives of participants who disrupt normative discourses and produce their Aboriginal students as learners who belong school, in a context where the racist discursive planes steeped in colonial history render these productions a labour of reconstitution.

My findings demonstrate Aboriginal students are excluded from school through a multitude of designations that show them they are impossible students and therefore cannot be of the school, while simultaneously securing non-Aboriginal educators’ exalted settler identities. Popular discursive strategies and rhetorical manoeuvres position Aboriginal students and their parents as anti-school, but never the educator as anti-Aboriginal. These strategies and manoeuvres, which are both taken up and resisted by the participants in this study, include: insisting integrating Aboriginal culture makes racism impossible, citing the effects of the
residential schools and relegating inequality to the past, providing Aboriginal students with substandard teaching and then claiming they are unmotivated, insisting Aboriginal parents do not care about education, calling Aboriginal students a threat to the integrity of the school, claiming schools with a predominant Aboriginal population are not “real” schools, and taking for granted that Aboriginal students are disrespectful and challenging. I traced how such exclusionary discourses produce Aboriginal students as deficient, inferior, undeserving, lost, wounded, unmotivated, undesirable, distrustful, undisciplined, threatening, and troublesome. I also demonstrated how teachers disrupt dominant discourses, and produce their Aboriginal students as keen, bright, intelligent, desirable, capable, resilient, and respectful. However, these positive subjectivities remain exceptional amongst the normative negative subjectivities.

The negative subjectivities are implicated not only in the making of impossible Aboriginal learners, but also in the making of impossible citizens. The subjectivities pressed upon Aboriginal students and their parents are at odds with foundational, settler colonial Canadian conceptions of proper citizenship that have been entrenched historically through the binary identifications of colonizer/colonized and white/Aboriginal. Regardless of Aboriginal peoples’ successful enactment of “proper citizenship,” it is their subjective formation that will always render their performances incommensurable with and therefore outside of proper citizen identity. This proper identity includes such qualities as a dedication to formal education, the adherence to meritocratic values, the possession of proper parenting skills and love of children, obedience to authority and the acceptance of the law as neutral, and being rational, centred and hardworking. The point is not that these qualities are good or bad in themselves, or that they are based upon fundamentalist myths (which they are), but that dominant discourses in Canadian society have always bestowed them upon white settlers while constructing these same values as lacking, or inadequately
performed, in Aboriginal peoples and various minority groups. It is impossible for Aboriginal peoples to fulfill these values because the proper Canadian citizen is white. While to be white is to be always already a proper citizen, and this status is maintained even when whites fail on the imagined terms of citizenship, to be Aboriginal is to be always already outside of proper citizen status. Because there can only be a proper citizen if there is also an improper citizen, the abject Aboriginal other must be constructed. In order for white settlers to know themselves as the superior and entitled citizens, Aboriginal peoples cannot be what the white settlers are. Transgressions by Aboriginal peoples from the values that denote citizenship must therefore be constantly invented, imagined, exaggerated or misrepresented.

**Significance & Broader Implications**

Normative discourses presented in this thesis are implicated in the very making of who Aboriginal students are, including their possibilities for being and belonging, and the expectations for their participation, in dominant society. Schools are incredibly crucial sites for identity making; they are spaces where identities are made that students carry into adulthood (Reay, 2010). While negative subjectivities do not automatically place Aboriginal students into a pipeline to prison, a metaphor that conjures up an image of incarceration as an inevitable consequence of schooling experiences, the subjectivities I have explored in this thesis are, as explained above, at odds with the professed values and qualities of citizens of the nation-state. Constituted as outsiders by being subjectivated as devoid of the qualities and values of the nation state, the incarceration of Aboriginal peoples can be anticipated as a rightful space, an argument supported by the notion that space and subjectivity are always interrelated (Razack, 2014).

While a number of dysfunctional consequences may follow from abject subjection, and
contact with the justice system is but one, in keeping with the original intent of this thesis to
examine links between normative discourses and criminal subjecthood, it is imperative to
consider how spaces of incarceration are fitting of the negative subjectivities pressed upon
Aboriginal students. For Aboriginal students who are pushed out of school, constituted as having
no place in the settler colonial world, and likely possessing few skills from a substandard
education, making a trajectory into criminal activity may be consonant with whom they have
been produced as being. This analysis is possible in consideration that subjectivities are never
fully a matter of personal choice. While white children in school are socialized into recognizing
that the whole world belongs to them (Leonardo, 2009a), Aboriginal children learn the very
opposite—off reserve in settler society, they learn they belong only in spaces of abjection.
Outside of the school, consider that the places Aboriginal peoples can call home in the city are
heavily policed (Razack, 2014), teeming with the likelihood of an encounter with law
enforcement whose objectives are also in line with the project of white supremacy. Spaces of
incarceration are ideal spaces where Aboriginal peoples are recognized as who they have always
been presumed to be—degenerate and threatening others. As underlined by Razack (2014)
Aboriginal peoples in the city streets are “widely assumed, by both the public and the police, to
be out of place as alcoholics, drug users, gang members, prostitutes, and criminals” (p. 56). It
stands to reason that the prison both confirms the abject status of the Aboriginal other, and
sanctioned by the law, fixes his or her identity as the dangerous other who threatens the safety of
the nation.

In understanding identity making as a dual process, the above analysis brings me to
consider how settler identity is (re)secured by discursively casting out Aboriginal students from
the space of the school. Again in consideration that Aboriginal peoples are produced as
possessing values contra those of the settler colonial nation, the deep resistance in settler society to Aboriginal students’ entry into the category of learner makes sense if we consider that educators are not only performing racism, but are defending nationalist, colonial and raced conceptions of self. According to Schick (2014), the threat of difference and loss are not from the Aboriginal student, for he or she is always already marked as the outside other, “but from the potential for the community to fail to cohere in its claim to particular colonizing narratives that constitute their sense of how they understand themselves” (p. 92). Excluding Aboriginal students from school is an important identity making process for educators and settler society; specifically, it enables them to see themselves as “exalted subjects” (Thobani, 2007), whose very being depends on who they are not—the abject Aboriginal other. The exalted subject is a national subject, exalted above all others as “the embodiment of the quintessential characteristics of the nation and the personification of its values, ethics, and civilizational mores . . . This subject is universally deemed the legitimate heir to the rights and entitlements proffered by the state” (Thobani, 2007, p. 20).

While exalted/outcast subjects may be social constructs, these constructs are made to matter discursively through a citizen subjectivity as always entitled, and tangibly through access to resources. Processes of exaltation in schools, which delineate the human characteristics that distinguish national subjects from others, secure the Aboriginal students’ unworthiness to the resource of education—although the Aboriginal student might be in the school, he/she is not worthy of the school, and has no legitimate or respectable claim to it. As the outsider, the Aboriginal student who wishes to achieve academically is a figure of concern because he/she “‘wants’ what nationals have” (Thobani, 2007, p. 21).

Razack (2014) employs a frame of analysis that sheds further light on the questions of
what is threatened by successful Aboriginal students. Referencing the freezing murders of several Aboriginal men by white Saskatoon police officers, Razack argues these were practices “born of the settler’s need to maintain the lines of force of the colonial city” (p. 52). Razack explains that enduring narratives of the colonial state are called into question by the presence of Aboriginal peoples in the colonial city:

The colonial city belongs to the settler, and Aboriginal presence in the city inevitably contests settler occupation. Aboriginality unsettles, challenging the settlers’ claim to legitimacy by calling into question the colonial state’s most enduring fiction that Aboriginal people are a dying race. (p. 52)

While dropping Aboriginal peoples on the outskirts of the city in the dead of winter is a far more explicitly violent move than telling Aboriginal boys “not to come back” to school, ignoring a student’s absences until the student finally stops coming, pretending word searches are an education, or vigilantly surveying the Aboriginal students on the playground—these are also practices that maintain lines of force by designating Aboriginal students as threats and challenges to the colonial city, threats which must be recuperated. As Razack (2014) underlines, “settlers lay constant siege to the city” and the incursions of Aboriginal peoples into settler spaces must “be policed and constrained if the line is to hold” (p. 55). Following Razack (2014), who describes Aboriginal peoples in colonial cities as being “in the city but not of the city” (p. 54), I contend Aboriginal students are in the school but are never fully of the school, and that this is a positioning with broad implications in settler society.

By highlighting the everyday moments in school whereby Aboriginal students are made into racial subjects, it is important to underline that processes of exclusion from identity categories and negative subjectivations happen over time and are steeped in our colonial
history—it is through repeated interpellations that Aboriginal students become racialized. This idea of exclusion and identity-making as an ongoing process was discussed by First Nations participant Danielle, who spoke about why she felt so many of her friends and family members did not finish high school, stating she believed that leaving school for Aboriginal students is never caused by one single event, nor is it necessarily something one chooses: “The decision to leave school started maybe years and years ago. It’s not something that the student consciously chose, [it was] one negative experience layered over top of another experience, and layered over another one, like a snowball.”

Contributions

An important objective of this thesis has been to contribute to a body of work known as the school to prison pipeline. This is a broad field of research that has examined “a complex network of relations that naturalize the movement of youth of color from our schools and communities into under-employment and permanent detention” (Meiners, 2011). The commonality amongst scholars in the domain is a focus on under-education in the context of a punitive society that incarcerates persons with the same identity markers as those who are excluded from school. This dissertation has insisted that the over-incarceration of Aboriginal peoples in Canadian settler society is an issue for educators and that examining educational inequality as it continues today must take into account a changing colonial landscape that now includes an expanding system of mass incarceration. While scholars have pointed out there are instances where schools directly deliver students into the hands of law enforcement, I have shown how exclusion is also a process that happens over time; school and prison intersections are not straightforward. It is important to pay attention to the discursive consequences of the school to
prison pipeline metaphor, and how it can become a discourse of inevitability or even causality. It is a metaphor that conjures up images of racialized youth heading straight to prison; in the absence of agents of domination, it could be concluded that the youth arrive in the pipeline by their own choosing. Following Leonardo (2009b), who demonstrates metaphors about racial (dis)advantage are unhelpful when they mask the agents of domination, I suggest a metaphor is needed that “make[s] it clear who is doing what to whom” (p. 262).

While a number of scholars in the United States have focused on specific disciplinary policies that lead students out of school and into the hands of law enforcement, my work has focused on the subjectivating effects that schooling exclusions such as over-discipline have on the production of identities of all involved. In doing so, I have endeavoured to take into account the nuanced complexities of school and prison connections in a settler colonial context, and expanded on what counts as a schooling exclusion to include a multitude of designations that make students into subjects not of the school. My approach has not assumed incarceration is an inevitable outcome of any one schooling experience, and instead suggests that the discursive practices that undermine Aboriginal identity produce Aboriginality as abjectivity. Aboriginal students do not fail in school or become incarcerated because they are Aboriginal, but because of what this identity marker has come to signify through knowledge produced as an effect of race power. I have foregrounded how this race power works through discursive processes in a colonial context, functioning to define who Aboriginal peoples are and who non-Aboriginal peoples can become in relation to them. The multitude of discursive resources needed to accomplish this undermining must not be overlooked, an understanding that simultaneously opens up possibilities for disrupting normative discourses, and engaging in a labour of reconstitution that opens up possibilities for who can belong in the space of the school.
Limitations

This thesis is not without limitations. By employing frames of analysis that emphasize the operation of racism and colonialism, this has meant paying less attention to how anti-racism and anti-colonialism are also operating in schools. Had I foregrounded the latter, this would have been a different thesis. I remain cognizant of how my own positionality and social situatedness within discursive planes of knowledge has shaped this thesis at every step. I have identified patterns in discourse and historicized these discourses, demonstrating how they are not merely individual teachers’ perspectives, but rather discourses belonging to broader society in the Canadian prairie context. Nevertheless, the data I have collected is partial and incomplete, and the analysis is but one part of a much larger, more complex, and more nuanced narrative about Aboriginal education. Missing from this thesis is an infinite number of stories that could complicate, contradict, and expand upon the findings. The fact that my participants were from different locations across one prairie province meant I was able to illuminate similar discursive patterns that span across a large geographical space; however, research that studies multiple participants from one specific location would likely yield different findings. Further, as my research continues, I am interested in including different methods for data collection to access a wider range of discursive patterns in the everyday language in schools; observation and critical ethnography would be excellent choices for similar investigations. A larger sample of interviews from those occupying different social positionings, such as students, parents, police officers, and community members, could also reveal important findings.

Disrupting inequality requires multiple frameworks for analysis and the engagement of multiple disciplines. Institutional practices, social policy and structures must also be investigated; examples in this context are educational barriers related to geography, policy and legislation,
unequal funding for schools, the child welfare system, and the Youth Criminal Justice Act. It is my hope that educators and scholars will take inspiration from the incompleteness of this study, and the possibilities for further research it has opened up, to make new connections between education and incarceration in their own context, towards the same goals of equality.

**Recommendations for Educators**

What can educators take away from this research? Below are eight recommendations for educators wanting to disrupt normative discourses that lead to schooling exclusions for Aboriginal students.

**a. Look beyond cultural solutions.**

The integration of Aboriginal culture in schools is not a singular solution for Aboriginal under-education, even when it is accomplished in a way that is celebratory, identity affirming, and relevant to students’ lives. Multiple participants in this study seemed compelled to emphasize culture in their explanations for Aboriginal student success—yet these are the same teachers who also spoke of building a respectful school climate, practicing dignified discipline, creating exciting student-centred lessons, and having high expectations for Aboriginal learners. It is time to look beyond cultural explanations and examine these alternative explanations for student success that have little do with culture and everything to do with educators’ conviction that their Aboriginal students belong in school, and are full persons possessing a wide range of desires, feelings, and interests.

**b. Recognize that forms of oppression play out in schools.**

Schools are not neutral spaces. Recognize that interlocking processes of colonialism, nationalism, and racism are likely the largest barriers to Aboriginal student success, and these
must first be acknowledged before they are resisted. Oppression is exacerbated and re-inscribed when it is denied and ignored; consider that racism does not have to be willful acts of hatred to be formidable forces in the lives of students (Leonardo, 2013). Recognize the most well-intentioned people, and the “best” teachers, are often complicit in forms of oppression. Make race visible when it is ignored in raising issues of inequality, and publicly support those who raise the topic.

**c. Acknowledge your own complicity.**

The majority of participants who discussed racism faced by Aboriginal students told stories about other teachers. Unlearning anti-Aboriginal racism is a problem belonging to every non-Aboriginal teacher. Acknowledging that Aboriginal students face racism at school while continuously locating the problem as belonging to another teacher, in another classroom or in another school means the problem still belongs to no one at all—except to Aboriginal peoples.

**d. Examine disciplinary practices.**

Consider that disciplinary encounters are tremendously powerful identity-making moments. Many participants spoke of their personal commitment to dignified discipline practices that allow their students to return strengthened to the group and remain connected to school. Pay attention to the differential disciplinary treatment of students based upon race, class and gender. Aboriginal students are often labeled as challenging before they say or do anything at all, while privileged students are expected and allowed to make mistakes at school. Refuse any one-size-fits-all approaches and reject practices that ostracize, punish, or expel.

**c. Don’t relegate inequality to the past.**

The racialized present is made possible only through *continued* patterns of inequality in the treatment of Aboriginal peoples. Teach colonialism, racism, and nationalism as *ongoing* systems of oppression instead of relegating them to the past—otherwise, there can be no present
day perpetrators, white innocence is upheld, and any significant change is forestalled. Acknowledge these systems of oppression as the responsibility of non-Aboriginal peoples to dismantle. Do not interpret this as a responsibility to “help” Aboriginal peoples heal from the past, but as a call for the unpacking of settler colonial discourses and anti-racist pedagogy.

**f. Ask uncomfortable questions.**

Risk provoking settler resentment by asking uncomfortable questions about Aboriginal education: Does the settler community really want to see Aboriginal students succeed in school? How do settler identities as exalted subjects remain secure through the failure of Aboriginal students? Are Aboriginal students privy to the best or the worst that schools and pedagogy has to offer? Whose interests do cultural theories really serve?

**g. Do not undermine Aboriginal parents.**

This merits its own category because of the large number of participants concerned that racist assumptions about Aboriginal parents work to justify the mistreatment of their children in school. All parents, Aboriginal or not, are diverse in their capabilities to be connected to their child’s schooling experiences, and in their reasons for being “involved” or not with the school. Examine and reject disparaging assumptions about Aboriginal parents and do not construct an idealized notion of parental involvement that is attainable only by powerful and privileged parents. Consider that any real distrust for the school stems from current mistreatment rather than only from the residential school era. Regardless of any parent’s circumstance or how the school perceives their “involvement,” educators are responsible for providing all children with the finest that pedagogy has to offer.

**h. Pay attention to the stories we tell.**

Lastly, all educators must pay close attention to the stories we tell about Aboriginal
education. The narratives told by participants in this research were multiple in their perspectives; educators re-cited but also countered and troubled the standard story of Aboriginal education, wherein virtuous educators try to help dysfunctional Aboriginal students whose failure is constructed as a foregone conclusion. The standard story is that of pitiable teachers, unmotivated students, and dangerous home lives—one story that must be called out for its racist dimensions and naturalizing of racial inequality. It is the responsibility of all educators to interrupt the standard story—not only those working with Aboriginal students.

**Recommendations for Further Research**

The findings from this dissertation have indicated several related topics for future research. Below are four recommendations for research questions that stem from the findings of this dissertation.

1) An ethnographic study of how male Aboriginal students’ trajectories from mainstream schools and classrooms into alternative, and hence marginalized, schools and classrooms are shaped by mismatched learner/masculine performances.

2) An investigation of how white teachers’ identities intersect with the popular discourse of mandatory Treaty Education as *for* and *about* Aboriginal peoples.

3) An investigation comparing the historical discourses of the residential school era and contemporary discourses in youth detention centres and alternative schools.

4) A study of how educators in schools with high performing Aboriginal students engage in a labour of reconstitution of learner identities by disrupting colonial discourses.
Final Thoughts

I embarked on this research convinced of the need to make links between our schools and the barbed-wired enclosures of the prisons, two highly racialized spaces in settler society. Leonardo (2009a) asserts, “dialogues about race are never easy” (p. 238), which certainly characterizes my own experiences as a researcher determined to enter into a long discussion about race that has become this thesis. In the Canadian prairies, few topics provoke such deep discomfort and resentment as anti-Aboriginal racism, and suggesting this is a problem belonging to a group of people considered most well-intentioned towards Aboriginal peoples—teachers, that is—renders this work all the more contentious.

It is likely that the version of the story I have told is different from the version of what the participants in this study may have expected. Importantly, it is also likely the teachers I interviewed are examples of those who are considered excellent teachers and the most well meaning towards Aboriginal students, which further highlights the need for a focus on the difficult work of disrupting oppressive senses of self. At many points during my writing, I was aware of my own desire to keep participants’ identities intact, and to tell a version of the story I felt would not cause settler discomfort. I often reminded myself that my objective was to tease out the racist, colonial, and nationalist dimensions in the standard story about Aboriginal education that often go unnoticed, sometimes because they are part of the repertoires of the very best teachers. I remain convinced that engaging with what makes us most uncomfortable and disrupts who we think we are, has the greatest potential for change. I also remain perplexed with how I can conduct Aboriginal education research without re-inscribing the very discourses I claim to desire to disrupt. In thinking through this important consideration, I have tried to ensure my written language does not re-shift the blame of racism onto Aboriginal peoples, and I have
refused to share the stories in my data that could potentially re-humiliate and re-pathologize Aboriginal peoples.

When asked about my research a while back, I would often provide a short answer and change the subject. I wanted to avoid the common responses that assumed I was employing individualizing lenses or those which praised me for “wanting to help.” Although I remain discouraged by the clamorous settler appetite for the destruction of Aboriginal identity in the Canadian prairies, I no longer shy away from discussing this research, and have learned to see resistance as further support and need for anti-oppressive work. The more people I dialogue with as I take my own advice of refusing to ignore racism and making talk of racism sayable, the more I discover the interest and support that exists for producing different and troubling knowledge about Aboriginal education. I do not end this dissertation with clear-cut answers for ending under-education or over-incarceration but rather with a renewed commitment for anti-oppressive practice and research, and an increased fervour for change in our schools.
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APPENDIX A: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

ABOUT THE EDUCATOR:
I am going to begin by asking you questions about your teaching experience.
   1. Why did you decide to become a teacher?
   2. How long have you been teaching?
   3. Where have you taught?
   4. How would you describe your teaching style?

ABOUT THE SCHOOL:
I am now going to ask you questions about your school.
   1. How would you describe your school?
   2. How would you describe the students in your school? (Include racial and socio-economic backgrounds).
   3. How would you describe the staff in your school?
   4. What types of support programs does your school offer?
   5. Does your school offer any types of alternative programming?
   6. Can you tell me about the students who are usually a part of these programs?
   7. Why do you feel that certain students, and not others, end up requiring extra support at school?
   8. In your experience, are the support programs (i.e., special education, pull-out) (in)effective? In what way?
   9. What would you say is the philosophy of teaching and learning in your school? (What do you feel is the purpose of your school? What does it accomplish in the lives of the students?)
  10. What would you consider to be the most important priority at your school?
  12. What did you discuss at your most recent staff meeting?
  13. How does your school define success?
  14. What does a student in your classroom or school require in order to be successful?
  15. Can you tell me a bit about the students in your school who are considered successful?
  16. What can you tell me about the students in your school who are not considered successful?

ABOUT SCHOOL DISCIPLINE AND CLASSROOM MANAGEMENT
My next set of questions will focus on discipline and classroom management.
   1. Can you tell me about the rules and procedures that students are expected to follow in your classroom and school?
   2. Do you feel that the rules and procedures at your school are fair? Please explain your answer.
   3. Do you feel that there are any students who are unfairly targeted, or singled out, for not following rules or procedures?
   4. Do you feel that students are unfairly targeted for discipline because of their racial background?
   5. What types of behavior are generally not accepted in your school?
   6. Does your school have consequences for students who do not follow rules or procedures?
Aboriginal Education
I am now going to ask you questions that specifically focus on Aboriginal education and Aboriginal learners.
1. How is improving educational outcomes for Aboriginal learners a priority in your school?
2. How do Aboriginal students in your school perform academically in comparison to their non-Aboriginal counterparts?
3. What recommendations do you have for improving educational outcomes amongst Aboriginal learners?
4. A high percentage of Aboriginal students do not complete secondary schooling. How do you understand this problem?
5. What can schools do in order to reduce the high numbers of Aboriginal students who leave school?
6. Do you feel that racism is a factor in Aboriginal students leaving school? Why or why not?
7. Do you feel that educators have an influential role in the lives Aboriginal youth?
8. Are the needs of Aboriginal learners different from non-Aboriginal learners?
9. Do you know of any system-wide initiatives or school-wide initiatives for improving educational outcomes for Aboriginals?
10. How do your colleagues usually respond to these types of initiatives? (if any are named).
11. How do students respond to these initiatives? (If any are named). How have these initiatives been successful or unsuccessful?
12. How do you understand the integration of Aboriginal worldviews and perspectives into the curriculum?
13. What is the most common way that teachers or schools try to improve levels of education amongst Aboriginals?

Aboriginal over-incarceration
I am now going to ask you questions related to Aboriginals and the justice system.
1. In what way is your school connected to the justice system? For example, do you have a school resource officer?
2. Are there ever incidents in your school where police are contacted? Can you describe what happens during these incidents?
3. How can schools prevent Aboriginal youth from coming in to contact with the justice system?
4. Why do you believe there are high numbers of Aboriginal youth in custody in the province of Saskatchewan?
5. In general, why do you believe there are high numbers of Aboriginal peoples in the justice system?
6. What role do you think that educators might play in reducing numbers of Aboriginal peoples in custody?
7. Who needs to play a role in reducing the high numbers of incarcerated Aboriginals?
8. Are the correctional facilities in Prince Albert ever discussed amongst the staff or students at your school? In what way?
9. In what ways do you see these correctional facilities having an impact on the lives of Aboriginal youth? For example, do you know of students who might have family in these facilities?
10. What do you feel is the purpose of correctional facilities and penal institutions?
11. What do you feel needs changing within the criminal justice system?
APPENDIX B: RECRUITMENT POSTER

(printed on University of Toronto letterhead.)

Participants Needed for Doctoral Research Project

Project Title: The School to Prison Pipeline: Discourse, Teachers, and Aboriginal Youth

Principal Investigator: Amanda Gebhard

Participants are presently being recruited for a doctoral research project that is being conducted through the department of Curriculum, Teaching and Learning at the University of Toronto.

In Saskatchewan, Aboriginal peoples make up upwards of 60 percent of the prison population. High numbers of Aboriginals in custody have low levels of education, suggesting that improving educational opportunities for Aboriginal youth is an important way of reducing the numbers of Aboriginals in custody. However, numerous reports on Aboriginal education suggest schooling today for Aboriginals continues to be overshadowed by colonization, racism and inequality. Over half of Aboriginal youth across Canada do not complete their secondary schooling. This research project seeks to understand how educators make sense of both the educational inequality and the high rates of involvement with the justice system amongst the Aboriginal youth they teach. Specifically, this research seeks to understand how educators’ daily work involves both resisting and maintaining discourses that legitimize the over-management of Aboriginal youth. In order to collect this information, the researcher is conducting interviews with educators of varying racial backgrounds working in schools with substantive populations of Aboriginal youth.

Participants in this study will be asked to participate in an interview lasting approximately 90 minutes. They will be asked open-ended questions on a number of themes related to their perspectives on Aboriginal education and Aboriginal over-incarceration. Participants in this study will be assured total anonymity in every step of the research process.

For more information on participating in this study, please contact:

Amanda Gebhard
amandagebhard@gmail.com
306-749-7835

This study has been reviewed by, and received ethics clearance through the Office of Research Ethics, University of Toronto.
APPENDIX C: CONSENT FORM

(printed on University of Toronto letterhead.)

Title of Research Project: The School to Prison Pipeline: Discourse, Teachers, and Aboriginal Youth

Researcher:
Amanda Gebhard
amanda.gebhard@mail.utoronto.ca
(306)749-7835

I understand that the purpose of this inquiry is to understand how educators make sense of both the educational inequality and the high rates of involvement with the justice system amongst the Aboriginal youth they teach.

I understand that I am agreeing to participate in an audiotaped interview, approximately 90 minutes in length, to discuss a variety of topics related to my teaching context and teaching practices, my experiences working with Aboriginal youth, my perspectives on Aboriginal education, and my perspectives on Aboriginal over-incarceration.

My participation in this project is voluntary and I am under no obligation to agree to participate in the interview. I understand that I will not be paid for my participation. I may withdraw and discontinue participation from the study at any time. If I feel uncomfortable in any way during the interview session, I have the right to decline to answer any question or to end the interview.

I understand that the researcher will not identify me by name in any reports using information obtained from this interview, and that my confidentiality as a participant in this study will remain secure. To help protect my anonymity, I will be asked to read and revise transcripts generated from my interview. This will allow me the opportunity to edit out any information that I feel is too sensitive or that I feel would serve to identify me. I understand that my name will not be identified in any report or presentation that may arise from the study, and that pseudonyms will be used. I understand that only Amanda Gebhard, and her faculty supervisor, Dr. Heather Sykes, will have access to the information collected during the study. Should a professional transcriber be hired, he/she will be bound by confidentiality. I understand that the findings of this study will be presented at conferences and include a range of publications.

I understand the risks associated with this study are minimal and that my participation is strictly confidential. The benefits of my participation may include the opportunity to reflect on my teaching practice and perspectives, and the opportunity to discuss pedagogical issues. The researcher does not and cannot guarantee or promise that I will receive any benefits from this study. I understand that this research study has been reviewed and approved by the Office of Research Ethics at the University of Toronto. Should I have any questions in regards to Ethical Review, I can contact the Office of Research Ethics at the University of Toronto: 416-946-3273.

I have read and understand this consent form. I have had all my questions answered to my satisfaction.
I, __________________________ volunteer to participate in a research project conducted by Amanda Gebhard from the University of Toronto.

Please keep one copy of this consent form and please return one copy to me.

My Signature ____________________________          Date___________________________

My Printed Name_____________________________

Signature of Investigator________________________ Date___________________________

Investigator Printed Name_______________________
APPENDIX D: INVITATION LETTER

(signed and printed on University of Toronto letterhead.)

Date

Dear Educator,

My name is Amanda Gebhard and I am a PhD candidate in the department of Curriculum, Teaching and Learning at the University of Toronto. You are invited to participate in a research project entitled: The School to Prison Pipeline: Teachers, Discourse and Aboriginal Youth. This project is a major part of the requirements for my doctoral degree, and is funded by the University of Toronto and the Ontario Ministry of Education. This research is being conducted under the supervision of Dr. Heather Sykes.

In Saskatchewan, Aboriginal peoples make up upwards of 60 percent of the prison population. High numbers of Aboriginals in custody have low levels of education, suggesting that improving educational opportunities for Aboriginal youth is an important way of reducing the numbers of Aboriginals in custody. However, numerous reports on Aboriginal education suggest schooling today for Aboriginals continues to be overshadowed by colonization, racism and inequality. Over half of Aboriginals across Canada do not complete secondary schooling. Indeed, the relationship between schooling and incarceration for Aboriginal peoples is complex, and the goal of my doctoral research project is to gain knowledge about the connections between schooling and incarceration for Aboriginal youth. I seek to learn how educators working with substantive Aboriginal populations make sense of the inequalities Aboriginal face in both the education and the justice system. Further, I seek to understand how educators’ daily work involves both resisting and maintaining discourses that legitimize the over-management of Aboriginal youth.

In order to collect this information, I am planning to interview up to fifteen educators who have experience working in a school setting with Aboriginal youth. I am hoping to recruit participants of varying racial backgrounds. You are being asked to participate because of the demographics of your teaching environment. Should you decide to participate, your commitment would entail participation in an in-depth interview lasting approximately 90 minutes, and comprised of questions on a variety of themes, including your teaching context and teaching styles, discipline policies in your school, your perspectives on Aboriginal education, and your perspectives about Aboriginal incarceration and the justice system.

Your participation in this project is completely voluntary and confidential. Should you choose to participate: During the interview, it is your right to choose not to answer any questions you do not feel comfortable with, and you may decide to withdraw from the project at any time. No value judgments will be placed on your responses, and all information will be retained in a secure location. Within all research writing and publications that stem from this project, you will remain completely anonymous. Pseudonyms will be used to protect your identity, and your confidentiality will be strictly maintained.
Should you wish to participate, or should you be interested in further information about the nature of this project, please contact me by email or phone at your earliest convenience. You can reach me by email at amandagebhard@gmail.com, or by phone at 306/749-2460/306-749-7835. All of our communications will be kept completely confidential, and absolutely no one will be made aware of your decision to decline or to accept this invitation. Also, no one is made aware that you are receiving this letter.

This research project has been approved and received ethical clearance by the University of Toronto Research Ethics Board on March 8, 2013.

I sincerely thank you for considering participating in this project.

Regards,

Amanda Gebhard