Robust Respect: De-centering Deficit Thinking in Family Literacy Work

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Abstract

This paper is rooted in an assumption that the tenacity of deficit thinking in family literacy programs in Canada is partly a reflection of our colonial settler history. I explore how embracing an ethic of "robust respect" may offer a way of re-orienting family literacy programs away from deficit thinking and towards relationships. Drawing on observation of the Traditional Aboriginal Parenting Program, I describe how "robust respect" is characterized by building respectful relationships, valuing the other, and acknowledging the historical and political context in which family literacy work is located.

Introduction

This paper is located in my relationship to Treaty 4 land, the traditional land of the Cree, Saulteaux, Lakota, Nakota, Dakota and Métis people. It draws on my developing understanding, as a white settler, of the way that the "myth of the fort" and "colonial frontier logics" (Donald 2009a, 2009c, 2012) shape family literacy work in Saskatchewan. As a visitor to this land, I am ever grateful for the individuals and communities who have shared their experiences and ways of knowing with me.

This discussion is informed by my interest in and experience of the tenacious presence of deficit thinking in family literacy programs. Family literacy programs, which support literacy learning in the context of family relationships and practices (Brooks, Hannon & Bird, 2012), have long been criticized for reproducing deficit thinking (Anderson, Anderson, Friedrich & Kim, 2010). As a researcher, I have become increasingly interested in the ways that deficit thinking in family literacy work is intertwined with the historical and ongoing logics of settler colonialism. The shift towards looking at deficit thinking through the lens of colonial frontier logics (Donald, 2009c) has helped me realize that when I entered into this work (when I entered into this world), I entered a space that was always already colonized and in which I was always already a settler, embedded in colonial relations. I also began to feel that as long as understandings of family literacy are informed by the pedagogy of the fort (Donald, 2009c), family literacy practice will continue to be shaped by deficit thinking.

Family Literacy, Deficit Thinking and the Pedagogy of the Fort

Deficit thinking is embedded in the roots of family literacy work (Auerbach, 1995). It shapes programs that focus on intervening in and changing the practices of families in order to 'fix' them (Reyes & Torres, 2007), sometimes referred to as intervention-prevention programs. Deficit thinking also appears in programs and policies explicitly informed by a strengths-based approach (Auerbach, 1995; Reyes & Torres, 2007; Crooks, 2017). Although countering a deficit perspective has been a focus of discussion in the field for many years (Anderson, Horton, Kendrick & McTavish, 2017), the dominance of deficit thinking persists. As I have engaged with this problem as a practitioner and researcher, it has often seemed that it is an intractable one, as if deficit views are embedded in the ontology of family literacy programs. It is my hope that by exploring this problem in new ways, with new language and with a new orientation (Ahmed, 2007b), I might begin to move in a different direction, one which de-centers deficit thinking.

One of the new ways that I have come to understand deficit thinking in family literacy is through the lens of colonial frontier logics and in particular, the pedagogy of the fort. According to Donald, "Fort pedagogy works according to an insistence that outsiders must be either incorporated—brought inside to become like the insiders—or excluded in order for progress and development to take place in the necessary ways" (Donald, 2012, p. 101). The pedagogy of the fort shapes how we understand learning and families and influences which literacy practices we value and don't value. Through fort pedagogy we are oriented toward the kinds of literacy practices that have been valued in schools.

Orientations

According to Ahmed, orientations "are about starting points" (2007b, p. 150). They "are about how we begin, how we proceed from 'here'" (p. 151). Orientation is about what we face as well as what we turn our backs to, about what is in reach and what gets in the way. Consequently, a small shift in orientation can have a significant impact on where we end up.

My explorations into the tenacity of deficit thinking in family literacy work have highlighted that the dominant approach to family literacy programs and policy starts with the idea that there is a particular set of practices that parents should adopt in order to support their children in school. These practices are rooted in a school-based, autonomous view of literacy (Street, 2017); for example, school-centered notions of kindergarten readiness and parent involvement appear regularly in texts and conversations in the field. And to the extent that family literacy discourse is oriented to school-based understandings of literacy, family literacy programs turn their backs to communities and to the traditional practices of those positioned outside the fort (Donald, 2009c). This is true of both family literacy programs operating from an intervention-prevention approach and family literacy programs working from a strengths-based perspective (Auerbach, 1995). In theory and practice, family literacy programs have been repeatedly constructed as an entry point to schooling for children and families and the role of family literacy work has been understood as one of bringing families into 'the fort' by supporting them in adopting dominant Eurowestern literacy practices. Such practices are those that better match the 'whiteness' of schools (Rogers, 2014; Van Ingen & Hals, 2006) and in emphasizing these practices family literacy program spaces reproduce this whiteness in many ways (Crooks, 2017). Further, in orienting family literacy programs towards these school literacy practices, family literacy discourse and practice often works to invisiblize and ultimately devalue the literacy practices of families perceived as being outside the fort, including Indigenous and non-English speaking/newcomer families, and to reproduce colonial relations in family literacy programs (Reyes & Torres, 2007).

In thinking about how we might move towards a 'better' or more ethical (Ahmed, 2002) approach to family literacy work, I have begun to explore how we might orient programs differently. One possibility is that instead of orienting them towards the school (in its role as the fort) we might orient family programs towards relationships (within programs and the community). Through my research, I have come to believe that programs informed by an ethic of “robust respect” (Crooks, 2017, p. 178) might better support an orientation to relationship.

The Study

The paper draws on data collected during a study informed by feminist approaches to ethnography and genealogy (Pillow, 2003; Tamboukou & Ball, 2003). Research methods included interviews, observation and document analysis in diverse programs including a family literacy program for newcomer mothers, a family literacy program for ‘at-risk’ families with preschool children, and an Aboriginal parenting program. This paper draws predominantly on data collected in the last research site.

My analysis addresses the ways in which words and practices “enable different kinds of actions within institutions” (Ahmed, 2007) and explores the “regimes of truth” at work in family literacy policy and programs (Tamboukou, 2003). In addition, my analysis is informed by “colonial frontier logics” (Donald, 2009) as an analytical lens through which to explore the ways in which historical and ongoing settler colonialism shapes family literacy policy and practice.

The data presented here were collected during observations of three family literacy programs: *Families Learning* offered by the Community Literacy Program, *READ* offered by the Children’s Centre and the *Traditional Aboriginal Parenting* program also offered by the Children’s Centre in partnership with another community based organization. *Families Learning* is a program for newcomer mothers learning English as an additional language. The program includes parent-child together time, play and learning time for preschool children and English literacy classes for the mothers built around themes of family literacy and parenting. Families Learning is informed by a learner-centered approach in which participants are seen to be experts on their own learning needs and decisions about the content of the program are made in partnership with the participants. During my observations in this program, I met fourteen mothers from at least nine different countries who spoke at least seven different languages.

The READ program is a family literacy program developed by two university-based researchers. The main objective of the program is to empower parents by helping them learn more about children’s literacy development and about supporting their children to succeed in school. During my observations of the program, eleven of the twelve regular participants were women/mothers. One was a man/father. About half the participants were Aboriginal. Two participants were newcomer women who spoke English as an additional language. The rest appeared to be Canadian born (settler) women.

The Traditional Aboriginal Parenting (TAP) program was developed for and by Aboriginal people. The program is focused on reviving/reclaiming traditional Aboriginal parenting practices and supporting Aboriginal parents in understanding the value of those practices. The curriculum is rooted in an understanding that Indigenous communities in what is now called Canada/North America had functioning approaches to raising and educating children before Europeans arrived/interfered. It also acknowledges some of the ways in which European and Canadian colonizers actively worked to eradicate such practices within Indigenous communities (See Grass, 2015). Family literacy is integrated into the program as part of holistic conversations about community and family relationships. Of the ten regular participants in the program I observed, nine were women/mothers and one was a man/father. All of the participants were Aboriginal. The program was facilitated by two Aboriginal women with the support of a Cree elder.

My participation and observation in all three of these programs influenced my understanding of the ways in which deficit thinking shapes and is reinscribed in family literacy practice. It was, however, my observations in the Traditional Aboriginal Parenting that most contributed to a transformation in my understanding of deficit thinking and family literacy programs.

Seeing Robust Respect

In the Traditional Aboriginal Parenting program, I feel I witnessed an approach to working with families that was oriented differently than the dominant family literacy discourse. In this program the facilitators, the content of the program and the underlying view of learning and literacy were oriented in a way that did not emphasize schools and mainstream parenting approaches that support schooling. Instead, it seemed to me that the program was built around understandings of respectful relationships. Within this context, deficit thinking did not completely disappear, but it seemed de-centered. This approach to respect was something that I sensed or felt more than observed. Rooted in/illuminated by moments of “transgressive data” (St. Pierre, 1997), my experience of becoming aware of this difference was not linear or easily described. But from the beginning of my observations in the program, I felt that there was something unique or more respectful about the relationships I was witnessing.

When reflecting on what was different about the environment in the program, I first recognized what I had *not* observed in the program. In the other programs that I observed, I noted distinct moments in which practices and discourse rooted in deficit thinking worked to undermine strength-based and learner-centered approaches. In the TAP program I did not notice the same moments of tension. Instead, respect seemed present in practically every moment and the relationships with participants took precedence over the content that the facilitators were there to share. Throughout my observations in the TAP program, I consistently saw the facilitators and the Elder interact with the participants in ways that were caring and supportive. The facilitators laughed and made jokes, listened to and shared stories. As a group, the participants seemed to respond to this. They laughed, shared about their lives and asked questions. Over the six weeks of the program, I saw the participants become consistently more engaged and present. Observing, and more importantly experiencing this, I began to understand that there may be ways to see family literacy, to do family literacy (work), from a different orientation, one that is perhaps just slightly askew of the dominant perspective.

The term “robust respect” is my attempt to describe this orientation. Robust respect is a kind of respect that continues to be strongly present in the face of the dominant deficit discourses of family literacy work. This respect is characterized by its thoughtfulness, it values the other as worthy of that respect, and it acknowledges the historical and political circumstances that lead participants and practitioners to be in the room together at a given moment. In the remainder of this paper, I flesh out how I saw robust respect being enacted in the TAP program. I describe what made it different from the ways that I had seen the notion of respect being used before and discuss how an ethic of robust respect might support the development of ‘better’ relationships (Ahmed, 2002) in family literacy programs.

Respect as common sense

The idea that learners should be respected may appear common sense to many educators. Indeed one could argue that, to some extent, adult and family literacy are fields rooted in respect for learners (Darville, 2011; Gordon, 2000; Thomas & Skage, 1998). In family literacy discourse, respect for families is often referenced as an underlying value of the field, particularly in community-based programs that explicitly identify as strengths-based (e.g. Anderson, 2017; Compton-Lilly, 2009; Menard-Warwick, 2006; Wilson, 2009). For example, Mary Gordon, the founder of the Toronto District School Board's Parenting and Family Literacy Centres, writes:

> We always saw the family as the answer to problems rather than their cause, and the overriding value of the centres was one of *respect for all families* [emphasis added], who were seen as possessing significant strengths and the ability to find answers and solutions to their difficulties (Gordon, 2000, p. 45).

On the other hand, by itself a rhetorical commitment to respect does not change the (deficit-thinking) discourse in which it is embedded. In my experience references to respect often appear alongside, and embedded in, deficit assumptions in family literacy research, practice and policy. For example, Gordon's (2000) reference to respect above is followed by statements linking poverty to lack of support for early literacy development, advocating early intervention to ensure that children enter kindergarten "ready to learn" (p. 46), and emphasizing the role of the centres in integration of newcomer, non-English speaking families. While perhaps not inherently problematic, these ideas are strongly linked to deficit discourses in education (Valencia, 2010). That such appearances of a commitment to respect alongside, and entangled with, ideas rooted in deficit thinking is common in the field suggests that common sense commitments to respect easily intertwine with common sense deficit notions. Thus, in some ways, common sense commitments to respect may actually work to reproduce deficit thinking since the extent to which they are entangled with common sense deficit notions makes it hard to talk about a respect-based practice as something new and transformative.

At the same time, it may be that this valuing of respect in the field offers a place/space to begin - a new orientation that might move us in the direction of a more transformative practice. Although I see the term 'respect' being used in contexts shaped by deficit thinking, I have come to believe that an ethic of *robust* respect might be able to do something different. The robust understanding of respect that I describe here fleshes out more common sense notions of respect into something more solid; something that is an action and doing, as well as a feeling or an attitude. Robust respect starts not just with a commitment to having respect *for* families as stated in the quote above. The respect I felt/saw enacted in the Traditional Aboriginal Parenting program, and felt/saw glimpses of elsewhere during my fieldwork, began with a commitment to fostering respectful relationships *with* families.

Respectful Relations/Thoughtfulness

A commitment to respect is something that I have heard in the words and seen in the actions of many practitioners with whom I have worked over the years, as well as those whom I interviewed and observed during my research. It is also an idea that appears in policy and training documents that shape the field. For example, the *Foundations in Family Literacy* course, positions respect in direct opposition to deficit thinking:

> We all have a need to be respected and to respect others. Many individuals and families face great obstacles as they build a sense of self-worth. They face the daily challenges of poverty, ill-health, violence, racism, and failure. People must have the opportunity within a safe respectful environment to build a strong sense of themselves and their own identities. Families and practitioners need opportunities to identify their inherent strengths and values through service to others, and to be enriched by the respect they offer and the respect they receive.
>
> When we respect ourselves and others, we behave in ways that make others feel valued for who they are, in the circumstances they find themselves. When we genuinely treat people with respect, they gain confidence in themselves and in the worth of their life experience. Respect engenders dignity and is the opposite of 'deficit thinking.' (Wilson, 2009, pp. 29-30)

Such discussions suggest to me that, in some cases, the field's commitment to respect is in fact *trying* to do something different; in some way it is an attempt to shift the dominant deficit thinking orientation of family literacy towards a more transformative practice - even if it doesn't always quite get us there.

My observations in the three programs and my interviews with practitioners demonstrated many ways in which practitioners show respect for the families they work with. Their interactions and words showed that this respect was rooted in a thoughtful commitment to reciprocal and respectful relationships demonstrated through practices such as listening, sharing their own experiences and making space within programs for connection. Practitioners that I interviewed, but did not observe, and documents I reviewed that inform family literacy work in Saskatchewan also indicated in various ways that respect for participants is a core value of community-based, learner-centred practice.

For example, the Families Learning program was based on the philosophy that the families were best able to identify their own needs and interests. The facilitator showed respect when she listened carefully to participants and used what she learned to inform the activities she planned and the resources she brought in. She created opportunities for participants to connect and share about their lives; she also shared personal experiences from her own life. The facilitator also took time to engage with the participants individually, listening more than talking, as the participants shared aspects of their lives outside of what the program explicitly made space for.

Similarly, I would describe the relationships that I witnessed between staff and participants at the Children's Centre, where the READ program took place, as characterized by respect, caring and warmth. In the READ program, the three facilitators made an effort to personally connect with participants. They talked with participants about where they were from, how they had learned about the organization, what school their children attended and how they were doing. The facilitators knew several of the participants' children from the preschool program and often shared with participants observations about something they had seen a child do in school. I witnessed the two Aboriginal facilitators (two of the three facilitators were Cree women; the third was a white woman) ask Aboriginal participants what reserve they came from and identify connections through family relations. The practitioners also all talked about themselves, their own children, and their successes and failures as parents.

At the Children's Centre the notion of respect consciously informed the approach to programming in the READ program and beyond. Policies that informed the work of the organization positioned respect as a guiding value. Many documents produced by and used in the Centre including program descriptions and parent newsletters, highlighted respectful relationships as being central to the practice of the Centre. In my observations at the Centre, I often noted the respectful way in which staff members interacted with families. Charlene, a Cree woman, who was a program coordinator and facilitator at the Children's Centre for both READ and TAP, modelled/enacted respect in many ways. I often witnessed Charlene's friendly manner with the parents. She greeted participants and through her actions and expressions communicated that she was interested to hear about their lives. She remembered things they had told her and followed up on concerns. I also noted that she treated her co-workers and me in the same friendly open way. In my interviews and informal conversations with Charlene, she repeatedly emphasized the importance of respect in informing the work of the Centre and her own work with families. From Charlene's perspective, respect at the Centre started with the way that children were treated:

> You know, like I said, the first time I came here… the thing that hit me most was how they treated the kids… Our young students are treated with pride and respect, you know. And you've seen that in the children eh, and you know that's the first thing Stacey. And in my mind I said, even before I seen the teachers interacting with kids, when I just did my walk through here, this is a place I want my child… my grandchild to come. (Interview 18)

Charlene described her efforts to put herself "on the same level" as the families that she works with. Respect, for Charlene had to do with making participants feel valued or as she said, "welcome and wanted." To Charlene, this was part of her philosophy of family support work (her primary role at the Centre) and also part of her approach to life: "It's important within our positions and this is something that I just practice throughout my life is to treat people with respect. I want to be treated with respect you know."

For other practitioners I interviewed and observed, the commitment to respectful (and reciprocal) relationships with others did seem to be a starting point that had the potential to shift the orientation of family literacy work. However, there were many times in interviews, documents and observations in which I noted a tension between the commitment to respectful relationships and the prevalence of the dominant discourse of deficit thinking in family literacy. I also observed this tension in my research sites: for example, in the READ program there were moments when the generally respectful attitude of staff came in conflict with the intervention-prevention (Auerbach, 1995) approach of the curriculum. In Families Learning I recognized this tension in moments when practitioners emphasized the newcomer mothers' gaps in knowledge about mothering practices in Canada, turning their backs to the strengths located in the women's diverse experiences. In these moments, the commitment to respect did not seem to be robust enough to counter the tenacity of the deficit view; in fact, in these moments it seemed that the view of respect as "engender[ing] dignity" and being "the opposite of 'deficit thinking'" (Wilson, 2009, p.

30) was being subverted. These moments suggested to me that in order for respect to be robustly present and to act as an orientation that directs us away from deficit thinking, it must be a process, an ethic that is chosen moment to moment in interactions with families.

In the Traditional Aboriginal Parenting program I saw respect embodied in a way that was more consistent and resilient and for the most part not marked by these same moments of contradiction. My observations of the TAP program, along with my reading of the program materials, suggested that there were a number of reasons for this. In addition to observing a commitment to respect through listening to and connecting with participants, in the TAP program I saw respectful relationships being supported by two other qualities. First, the program was informed by a holistic worldview that valued the other as inherently worthy of respect. Second, the curriculum and the pedagogy supported in the program acknowledged the social/political/historical context of the program. I will elaborate on each of these points below, beginning with a discussion of the ontology of the TAP program.

Valuing the Other

In the TAP program the approach to respect was made more robust by an ontology rooted in Aboriginal perspectives. This ontology was grounded in spirituality, depicted learning as integral to the journey of life and supported a view of others as inherently valuable/worthy of respect. As a white settler educator, I came to the Traditional Aboriginal Parenting program as a learner and see myself as a beginner in understanding the Indigenous perspective that informed the program. As I share here some of the things that I have learned from the elder, facilitators and participants in the TAP program, I hope to do so from a place of humility and openness and in a way that does not attempt to teach about these perspectives and also does not reinterpret Indigenous ways of knowing and being through a Eurowestern lens (Butler, 2016).

The TAP curriculum is grounded in a holistic view of life and learning that integrates the four quadrants of the medicine wheel: mind, emotions, body, and spirit. Consistent with Indigenous worldviews as described by Donald (2009), the TAP program is based in an "understanding of human existence [that] is premised on the spiritual" (Donald, 2009, p. 389). The centrality of spirituality was evident in many ways in the program that I observed and I would suggest that the presence - or infusion - of this worldview throughout the program informed the way in which robust respect was enacted in the program. Donald notes that "identifying with (Aboriginal) ontology comes through participation in ceremonies, rituals, and observance of the various ethical obligations and responsibilities that we have to each other" (2009, p. 390). This process was demonstrated in in the TAP programs as each session began with smudging and prayer. The Elder who supported the facilitators and practitioners in the program often emphasized the teachings of the spirit as the most important teachings for children. During one session she shared that the reason First Nations people "call everything sacred [is] because they are sacred" (Field notes, Feb. 15).

The image of the medicine wheel was used to underscore the understanding of life as a sacred journey, a "walk of life" as the Elder called it. Within this model, each individual was depicted as having their own unique journey of the spirit. This perspective was expressed by Charlene, the coordinator/facilitator for both the TAP program and READ, who described her own work and life by saying, "that's what the creator put me on this Earth to be, is to be a helper" (Interview 18). This understanding supported the view that all of us are who and where we ought to be. For example, the facilitators and Elder expressed the belief that mothers/parents were chosen for these roles (as were grandmothers and great-grandmothers). It seemed to me that this view supported a particularly compassionate view of parents, one that emphasized supporting parents in being themselves, rather than teaching them to model some normalized or idealized view of parenting or motherhood (Smythe & Isserlis, 2002). Underlying the idea that each person's life journey is unique was a message that, although we may learn from one another and we all have a responsibility to share our knowledge with those coming up behind us, we are not in a position to judge another as we have not experienced their journey. Children, parents and Elders were all described as being somewhere along the road: none have reached the end and each still have learning to do. Describing life as a journey, particularly a journey that can be imagined as going in a circle (ending where it began) suggested an equality of value among people; one person was not seen as being more valuable than another.

As I observed this orientation towards spirituality and the innate valuing of each human being as sacred, I felt the problem of deficit views of parents and mothers fade into the background. As the program centered beliefs that parents are chosen for their roles and that we are all on a learning journey, notions of strengths and deficit seemed irrelevant; in their place was a deep respect for the other's journey. The approach acknowledged that everyone has bumps in their road; however, these bumps were not constructed as deficits but were seen as part of the learning journey of life. I felt there was a message communicated that others cannot 'intervene' to 'prevent' such bumps, although they can sometimes share their own gifts in order to support and protect individuals who are having these experiences.

The ontology apparent in the TAP manual and in the way in which the program was facilitated by the two practitioners and the Elder reflected the way that other Aboriginal Elders and scholars have described learning and literacy. In the introduction to her 2013 collection, Marie Battiste references Saulteaux Elder, Danny Musqua: "Learning, he often says, is the purpose of our life journey" (2013, p. 18). I observed that this idea was integrated into the worldview of the TAP program; as the Elder explained in one session, referring to life as a journey around the medicine wheel, there are "teachings at every spoke" (Field notes Mar. 5). As discussed earlier, prayer was part of every session and the facilitators explained that this was a key component of the learning process, important to absorbing and remembering the teachings that were presented. Similar to Aboriginal views of literacy, (Antone 2003; Balanoff & Chambers, 2005; Moayeri & Smith, 2010; Ningwakwe 2003), the curriculum of the TAP program suggested that all learning, including literacy learning, is sacred and that, at the same time , it is embedded in the practices of everyday life; according to the program manual "everything was a teaching" (p. 21). Rituals and ceremonies were described as teachings but the program also emphasized that traditional everyday objects such as cradle boards, moss bags, traditional baby swings and teepees were intertwined with the everyday learning of children and adults. And although these items are artifacts of everyday life, they also have spiritual significance demonstrating what Donald (2009) calls "the daily ontological task" of balancing "the ways in which the spiritual world and the material world are connected" (p. 388).

The TAP manual describes traditional learning and parenting as being fostered within democratic relationships. The Elder extended this concept by contrasting the medicine wheel or circle that shapes Aboriginal society with the hierarchical or pyramidal structure of Canadian institutions, including schools. In making this observation she emphasized the ways in which deficits are located in these systems, rather than in individuals. This was reflective of a tension or balance that appeared repeatedly in the program; supporting Aboriginal children to succeed in school was valued, but at the same time schools were acknowledged as places that are often harmful for Aboriginal children. The program manual, facilitators and Elder all emphasized that the parents' (and communities') job is as much to protect children from schools as it is to support them in school achievement. This recognition required the acknowledgement of settler colonialism. As the manual stated, "it is still the government's agenda to assimilate us" (TAP program manual, p. 28). This example shows how, in moments, the program not only marginalized deficit thinking but also how it often shifted the source of expertise. The dominant way of thinking was subtly, or at times not so subtly, critiqued for its lack of attention to the spirit. Deficits were identified in the dominant way of thinking and strengths were located in Aboriginal ways of knowing. In doing so, the program levelled, or at times reversed, the prevailing hierarchy.

Coming to see how the ontology of the TAP program, rooted in an Aboriginal spirituality/epistemology and informed by a commitment to democratic relationships, shifted the orientation away from deficit and towards relationships was a powerful experience for me. In reflecting on my experience with/in this program, I began to see a possibility for an ethical orientation that created a space in which the other was seen as sacred and therefore as inherently valued, and for a family literacy practice that was not embedded in deficit thinking and colonial frontier logics. I have come to believe that this orientation in the TAP program is one that could also inform family literacy practice in other contexts. That is not to say that we (as white settlers or mainstream practitioners) might/should appropriate or adopt the ontologies of the TAP program; rather in seeing that this program operates from a different stance, we can recognize that it is possible to be oriented in a way that de-centres deficit thinking and that values the other in the context of relationships. As Donald (2009c) explains:

> Indigenous ontology offers a critical opportunity to live differently in the world today. Consciousness of traditional teachings can help us interrogate and contest Eurocentric philosophical traditions that shape the commonsense moral syntax that dominates current social, political, and economic discussions. (p. 390)

What I observed in the TAP program can be understood in various ways; understanding these practices as the actualization of robust respect is only one possibility, but it seems to me that it is a possibility that may "open up" (Ahmed, 2007b) new ways of thinking about family literacy work. This is particularly the case once we acknowledge that family literacy programs in Saskatchewan and Canada are embedded in a settler colonial context that has been shaped both by settler and Aboriginal ways of knowing. The importance of acknowledging this history is another important aspect of robust respect as I saw it enacted in TAP.

The Moment of Encounter

In the TAP program the holistic worldview of traditional Aboriginal communities was contrasted with a discussion of Canadian schools as hierarchical institutions that value competition and that are (still) working towards the assimilation of Aboriginal people (Van Ingen, 2006; Vowel, 2013). The view presented of Aboriginal and Canadian societies was not simply a binary of good and bad/us vs. them; Rather from the comments of the Elder and facilitators, I understood that a 'pure' Aboriginal perspective - or a pure Euro-western perspective - is not possible as we live in relationship to one another. However, acknowledging the contrast of the underlying ontologies of Canadian/Euro-western and Aboriginal perspectives described by the Elder using the metaphors of the circle and the pyramid was significant to the program. Further, in acknowledging the violent history of assimilation, or as Vowel (2013) calls it annihilation, that exists between Canadians and Aboriginal people and that has shaped the relationship of these two perspectives, the TAP program created a climate of honesty as a foundation to the creation of respectful relationships in the program. For me, as a researcher/learner who was participating/observing in the program as a white settler outsider, this acknowledgement created a climate that helped open up my understanding in new ways.

In my efforts to understand the ways in which an ethic of robust respect was supported in the TAP program, I came to recognize the importance of acknowledging (on an ongoing basis) the historical and socio-political circumstances which lead to the moment of encounter (Ahmed, 2002) or as Ahmed (2002) says, "the multiplicity of the pasts that are never simply *behind* us" (p. 559). During my observations in the program and as I reflected on the experience later, I felt that such acknowledgements are a necessary basis for a practice grounded in robust respect. As Ahmed states, "the immediacy of the face to face is affected by broader social processes that also operate elsewhere, and in other times, rather than simply in the present" (Ahmed, 2002, p. 562). For Ahmed, it is only through acknowledging this past that we might move forward towards "achieving "better" relationships to others" (p. 570). In the context of education in Saskatchewan, this requires us to acknowledge and explore the impact of historical and ongoing colonialism on the lives of participants and facilitators.

Acknowledging the impact of historical and ongoing settler colonialism on Aboriginal people and families was a foundation of the curriculum in the Traditional Aboriginal Parenting program. The program began with recognizing that Indigenous people that lived on the land that is now known as Canada had functioning systems of child rearing and education prior to colonization. Colonialism interrupted these systems and settler colonialism purposefully interfered with them in devastating ways. The impact of residential school was discussed as were laws that banned ceremonies and restricted the movements of Aboriginal peoples (such as the pass system). Links were also made to the foster care system today and to the ways in which schools are often damaging to Aboriginal youth.

What I saw and heard during these discussions suggested to me that they were important ones for many participants in the program. Although the participants all lived this history in various ways (as do I in my own way as a white settler), it seemed they had not always had the space to reflect on and name the historical processes of colonialism that impact their lives. During these discussions, several participants shared personal experiences that connected to the stories of colonialism that were being told. Others asked questions that demonstrated how they were beginning to understand in new ways the impact of Canadian assimilationist policies and practices, including residential schools, on their parents and grandparents, and how that in turn had shaped their own lives. It was evident in these conversations that some participants had already explored this history, and several shared stories about their healing journeys. In listening to the stories, I felt that openly discussing this history helped some of the participants come to a place where they could begin to see that the ways in which their bodies and their lives (and the bodies and lives of their children, their parents and their grandparents) didn't 'fit' (Pillow, 2017) into the system was because of this history, not because of some flaw (deficit) that was in them as human beings.

Another significant impact of discussing this history was that I was clearly positioned as a white settler. Speaking this context put my relationship with the Aboriginal bodies in the room on the table in front of us so that we could all acknowledge that I was a white settler who was part of that history of oppression and marginalization. In recognizing this I was reminded that, even if we had not discussed this history, it was still present in the room and in the bodies of the participants, the facilitators, and me, as researcher. In my experience, there has been little discussion of settler colonialism (or racism) in the context of family literacy programs, policy and research. When this history is addressed, the focus is generally on the effect that past events (such as residential schools) have had on Aboriginal communities and individuals; for example, practitioners (who, like me, are predominantly white settlers) sometimes discuss how to better support Aboriginal learners to heal and succeed in our programs. But I have come to recognize that we usually do not consider this context through a lens of relationality that might lead us to reflect on how who we are, as white settlers, is shaped by this same history (Donald, 2009c). Nonetheless, whether we acknowledge it or not, our relationships are embedded in these histories and it is through these histories that we come to be together in a room for a family literacy program (Haig-Brown, 2012). This recognition informed my need to be respectful in different ways because of who I was in that room. In order for me to be respectful in that space, I needed to bring with me an awareness of my own history and the sense of humility that it fostered. Through this experience I began to believe that by not discussing the historical (and ongoing) impact of settler colonialism in family literacy programs (in practice a denial or invisibilization of this history as well as a re-centering of whiteness) (Simpson, 2011; Van Ingen & Hals, 2006) we undermine our ability to be respectful across relationships of difference (Peltier, 2017). I began to see that the act of denying this history – whether in active ways or more passively though omitting or minimizing it - was an act of disrespect.

Acknowledging this history can feel threatening to those of us who have become "comfortable" (Ahmed, 2007b, p. 158) in the white spaces in which family literacy programs take place. For those of us who are white settlers, confronting that whiteness on an ongoing basis can feel unsettling (Wagner, 2005; Tuck & Yang, 2012). However, I feel that acknowledging our identity as settlers is valuable in "encouraging a deeper consideration of our relationships with Aboriginal peoples" (Tupper 2014, p. 473). I have also come to believe that fostering the kind of respectful relationships that can displace deficit thinking and orient family literacy work in different ways, can only be accomplished if we acknowledge these historical relationships on an ongoing basis.

Conclusion: Family Literacy Programs as Meeting Places

My observations in the TAP program suggest to me that it is possible to orient family literacy programs differently. By building on a foundation of robust respect we might orient family literacy programs towards ethical relationships. Instead of thinking about family literacy programs as interventions, we might think of them as meeting places in which we can learn from and alongside one another. Such meeting places can only function as "ethical spaces" (Ermine, 2007) if we acknowledge the complicated history that brings us together in the first place.

Family literacy programs informed by such an ethic may work more as meeting places in which there is an exchange of ideas and experience, and in such settings better relationships might be developed. I am interested to continue to explore how a commitment to robust respect might help us move toward 'better' relationships (Ahmed, 2002) in programs and how it might counter, or perhaps somehow avoid, the dominant narrative of deficit that often shapes family literacy work.

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