

**An Awakening of the Métis Spirit Within:
*Understanding My Struggle with Identity
Within the Educational System***

BY

Veronica M. Dyck

A thesis submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Education.

Faculty of Education, Curriculum: Teaching & Learning
University of Manitoba

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ABSTRACT

This thesis is written from the heart. It is an examination of my experiences as I journey through the educational system from the perspectives of both learner and educator. It is an exploration of my experiences in trying to make sense of who I am as an educator and a Métis person. Through a blended use of Indigenous and Western methodologies, I capture the various experiences encountered as I struggled with the development of my identity and the effects the educational system has had during that process. These experiences are captured through the sharing of my 'stories' and visions, as well as the process of journaling. It is through reflection and analysis of these experiences that I 'make meaning' and learn from them, retelling and articulating my understandings. Woven throughout the thesis are the issues of isolation, alienation, belonging, and connectedness which are associated with personal experiences with racism and oppression.

Counter balancing the struggles is the voice of hope in the abilities of educators to understand the need for belonging and the importance of relationship and community building. Through a critical analysis of my experiences, I attempt to 'make meaning' of

the current system and share my recommendations for the changes I believe are required to ensure education meets the needs of Aboriginal and Métis students in particular. The concept of change, in practices and systems is integral to education supporting a process of decolonization and healing. I offer my insights in the hope that my story will create the opportunity for educators to understand the potential role they play in this process and in the development of identity and voice of Métis learners within the educational system.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

There are many to whom I owe a debt of gratitude in my efforts to collect my thoughts and share my story. Before I do this though, I would like to dedicate this story to my father. The strong yet gentle Bear who has guided me since the beginning of my existence. Always knowing he is there to lean on, to hug, to share laughter and tears with, has been a source of enormous strength for me. It is a joy to watch him in his grandfather role with each of my children and I am eternally grateful to Creator for this gift.

From the Heart

This has been a long journey; one that is not over. I would be remiss though in not saying Marsee (Michif for thank you) to some special people in my life. To my husband Gary, Marsee for your love and patience over the last 24 years, *especially during this difficult journey*, and for your ability to see how important this is to me. To my children, Kyle, Kendall, and David, you are all special in your own way. Your strengths and love and the pride I have in you as individuals continues to guide my life. To my own brothers and sisters, know that your own journeys are not alone. I have felt your strength in every step I have taken. To my mother, what a task you took on, your strength and love have been so evident throughout all the ups and downs, Marsee.

To those who have supported and encouraged me all along the way, Juliette Sabot, Dawn Wilson, Mary Young, Lara Fitznor, Garry Robson, Dan Thomas, Wayne Serebrin and Jon Young, thank you for holding my hand when I needed it and for pushing me just enough when it was time. My gratitude cannot be expressed.

Honouring my Métis and Aboriginal Brothers and Sisters

There have been many Aboriginal people who have shared their thoughts and words and influenced me throughout this journey in many ways. Whether they were shared in ceremony, at community gatherings, in quiet conversations, articulated through written venues, expressed in conference settings, or via technology, there have been many individuals who have helped to guide my development, thought processes and the articulation of 'My Story'. There have also been many young people, with whom I have had the pleasure of sharing my life. Each were gentle guides, *alright, some not so gentle, but still very much appreciated*, in their own ways. To them I say Marsee. I miss the daily connection with you immensely.

Not to be Forgotten

Finally, to my non-Aboriginal friends, brothers and sisters, you know who you are, those of you who have been instrumental in keeping me on track, challenging my position and encouraging my growth. I say Marsee. A special thanks to those individuals who were a part of the original Master's Cohort Group. Working my way through the reconnection to post-secondary education and the memories and experiences that resurfaced as I began this journey would have been that much more difficult to go through had it not been for the 'group' we had.

I would be less without having walked this path with all of you.

Marsee (Michif)
Miigwech (Ojibwe)
Ekosi (Cree)
Muhsi (Dene)
Thank you (English)

Preface

Although I did not realize it in the beginning, the journey that I am on is one of healing, reclaiming, reconnecting and reawakening. Today I can tell you it is part of the process of decolonization. When I began, I did not even understand that I had been colonized. This journey began as an initial stirring from within, my quiet awareness of young Aboriginal faces in the halls, my pleasure in knowing they were there and my disappointment and curiosity when they slowly disappeared. The questioning that followed and the need to understand why this was happening was part of the process as well. The Elders tell us that things happen for a reason, this I believe to be true. I never questioned who I was until I began to notice and look for Aboriginal youth in the halls of the high school in which I taught. These young people have given me much over the years, but the most important gift they gave was their gentle push to start me on this journey.

What follows are my thoughts, stories, journal entries, recollections of events and reflections . . . essentially 'My Story'. As I share them with you, I attempt to identify them through the use of italics. What I believe to be true today, and how it connects with other Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal scholars, encompasses the remainder of the words. The traditional teachings I make reference to and share with you are those that have been gifted to me by different Elders and traditional teachers that have been and continue to be a part of my journey. I was careful to select those teachings that I have previously seen referenced in print by other Aboriginal authors and thus feel more comfortable in putting them down in writing. There are others I have received that I have not yet seen on paper

and out of respect to the sacredness of our ways and those who have shared them I will continue to carry them within. The decision to share traditional teachings is a difficult one. There is a need to balance the desire to help others learn about, and understand to some degree, Aboriginal philosophies and the recognition that they are holistic in nature, multi-layered and faceted, with many sacred processes incorporated, and thus difficult to articulate through a restrictive print medium. Our traditional teachings are shared through a oral method of teaching and embedded in the language, teacher, place and purpose. The struggles and complexities related to writing about Aboriginal Philosophies are further articulated by Fitznor (1998) in “The Circle of Life: Affirming Aboriginal Philosophies in Everyday Living.” I ask the reader to not assume integrate knowledge of these philosophies and teachings merely by reading my words. To acquire an appropriate level of understanding, I encourage people to seek out knowledgeable individuals, traditional teachers, and Elders and sit with them to learn in an appropriate manner.

Throughout this process, I have also been fortunate to learn from and reflect on many thoughts and words from many other Aboriginal writers. In wanting to support the growing area of Aboriginal academia, I have tried to use as many Aboriginal scholarly works as possible, and where I could, Métis specific authors.

A Brief Overview

I often find it useful to approach understandings from a broader perspective, ‘the big picture’ if you will, before I look at them in more detail. Respecting this need, I do so here as well. In the first two chapters of my thesis I describe the context I am working within as I strive to understand and articulate my initial steps, experiences, and understandings during the beginning stages of a decolonization process. In chapters three

to seven I capture this process and articulate the issues I struggled with as an educator and Métis person within the educational system. I believe the heart is an integral aspect of everything we do, and as a result, I open each of these chapters with a narrative that attempts to bring the reader closer to the ‘heart’ of my journey. In each chapter I offer suggestions for educators, both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal, that may be useful in their attempts to support Métis students as they journey through the educational system. The final chapter is where I look to the future, connecting us to land and the heart, and where I share my belief in the importance of this work not only to my children, but to the next seven generations.

Incorporating an Aboriginal Methodology in Organizing my Thoughts

In terms of organizing my story and guiding you on this walk, I’d like to introduce you to an Aboriginal conceptual tool often referred to as ‘the circle’. This tool is one that has been used for generations and is common within many Aboriginal cultures including the Métis. Circles are used for many different purposes and as such are referred to in terms of the various ‘types’. These may include sharing circles, teaching circles, healing circles, talking circles along with many others.

Generally, the process used in the circle is relatively similar from one Aboriginal group to another. It includes people gathering in a circle, sitting on chairs, blankets, the floor or the ground, depending on where the circle is being held. Often there is traditional medicine¹ either placed in the centre or placed by the facilitator, traditional

¹In Manitoba, the most common traditional medicines used in circles are Tobacco, Sage, Sweetgrass, and Cedar. For a better understanding of the circle and use of traditional medicines see Fitznor, (1998), “The Circle of Life: Affirming Aboriginal Philosophies in Everyday Living,” in *Life Ethics in World Religions*. (pgs 33 – 40)

teacher or Elder who is guiding the circle. The medicine used is chosen depending on the purpose of the circle, but is commonly used to smudge² the participants. Respect for the circle, its' teachings, all participants, the Elders and Creator is an integral aspect of the circle. This is shown through the behaviour and involvement of all participants. Collecting in a circle demonstrates that we are all connected and that we are all equal. No one person is better than or more important than anyone else in the circle. All have equal opportunity to share their thoughts, words, prayers, or feelings in the circle. No one can judge or put down what another person chooses to share and anything said in the circle stays in the circle.³

The circle sharing begins with the leader, whether it is an Elder, traditional teacher, group leader, educator or an individual, who opens the circle and gives guidance regarding the purpose and process about to be undertaken. Often a 'prayer' is shared and smudging may occur, although this is not always the case. Usually an object of some sort is passed around the circle indicating who is speaking. This item generally has some cultural significance such as an eagle feather, talking stick or grandfather (stone) which is passed from left to right. My experience with circles has been that they start in the east and move in a clockwise manner. This may not be the case with all cultures.

As we move into the circle, I clarify where I find myself and invite you to join me. Our teachings tell us that all are welcome and respected in the circle, so please feel free to reflect, consider, discuss and share your thoughts; they are integral to us moving

² Smudging is a process of waving the 'smoke' from the medicines being burned in the 'smudge bowl' over one's body. Generally, it is done to clear one's mind, body, and spirit of negative energy and to open oneself up to positive energy. Hart (1996) and Fitznor (2002) speak to this in more detail.

³ For a more in depth understanding of Sharing Circles and their use see Hart, (1996), *Sharing Circles: Utilizing Traditional Practice Methods for Teaching, Helping, and Supporting,* in *From Our Eyes: Learning from Indigenous Peoples*, edited by Sylvia O'Meara and Douglas A. West. Toronto: Garamond Press.

forward. In moving in an eastward direction we find ourselves going through a process of setting the context of the journey. In this, I lay the groundwork for understanding who I am, what I am attempting to do through the telling of story and why it is essential, I believe, for the reader to have a stronger understanding of the journey undertaken. Clarifying what I see as Aboriginal Education and the diversity and breadth of it is required to inform the discussion. I hope I have been able to do this in Chapter One.

As more and more Indigenous authors bring the work of Indigenous people to the forefront, there is a need to understand and clarify the relationship this has with what has historically been understood to be scholarly activity within the Western academia. Chapter Two is my attempt to help others travel the course I am currently on in balancing my understandings from two different world views on research and scholarly activity. I pray I have done justice to all my brothers and sisters who have undertaken this work through the words I share in this chapter.

Chapter Three takes us briefly through an understanding of colonialism and the underpinnings of it in terms of Aboriginal reality and education specifically. Here I attempt to demystify and clarify why so many of our people have and are struggling within the Western educational system and society as a whole. It is through an understanding of the past, that we will be able to move into the future as strong, healthy human beings.

In Chapter Four I introduce the reader to what I believe is an essential ingredient and the beginning stage to understanding what it means to be in relation with others. This is the area of trust and how I believe it is intrinsically linked to relationships that are

sustaining and empowering. Understanding trust and the impact it has on relationships is key to understanding how to reach Aboriginal youth and more specifically, Métis youth. In my experience, it has also been integral in the process of challenging educators to examine their beliefs as they work towards incorporating Aboriginal perspectives within the educational system.

Chapter Five captures the process I went through in trying to come to terms with who I am as a Métis person and what that means to me. This chapter takes the reader through the stages I experienced from ‘proving blood quantity’; to the identification of Métis ‘symbols’ like jigging, pemmican and the infinity flag; to the association with a Métis social and political body; and finally, to the recognition of my beliefs, values and actions, the understanding of my relations, the everyday teachings of the people who play an integral part of my life, and how these are the experiences and understandings that I identify with as a Métis person.

Once I began to become more confident and comfortable with who I am, I began to recognize and use my ‘voice’ in many different situations. Chapter Six is an exploration of voice and how integral it is to connecting with others both in terms of supporting it and respecting it. The use of voice is an important step in the decolonization process whether it is used to educate, demystify, challenge or advocate.

If the journey is to take us anywhere, we must reach a point where we can respect and nourish the relational aspect of Aboriginal and specifically Métis cultures and ways of being. Chapter Seven is my attempt to bring clarity to what it means to be ‘in relation’ and how that plays itself out in the concept of community in an educational arena.

The final chapter, Chapter Eight closes the circle and is my attempt to help the reader understand that 'we are all related' and that the choices one makes are linked to and will have an effect on my children and all children for seven generations and beyond. In closing the circle, I invite you to embrace my children and family and in doing so to rise to the challenge and opportunities that 'education' affords all of us.

If you read this work with a sense of sadness, I have not done justice to the people, their beliefs and ideas that have been shared with me. I believe this story is one of reclaiming, reawakening, and celebration and I hope it is told and read in this way. We all have an opportunity to walk this journey together, during these amazing times, and given that, I am full of hopefulness and excitement at what lies ahead. I welcome you to walk beside me and share in this, every step of the way.

A Note about Terminology

Aboriginal is a term commonly used in a generic sense to include the three main groups of people recognized as the original peoples of this land. It is used in section 35(2) of the Constitution Act, 1982, to identify the Indian (Status and non-Status), Inuit and Métis peoples of Canada.

Aboriginal perspectives is used in reference to the worldview of the Aboriginal cultures. These are seen as distinct from the mainstream culture of Canada. This worldview presents human beings as inhabiting a universe made by the Creator and striving to live in a relationship with nature, one another and oneself. Each Aboriginal culture expresses this worldview in different ways, with different practices, stories and cultural products.

First Nations is a term used to refer to the many distinct nations of the original inhabitants of 'Turtle Island' (a term used to describe the North American continent in many Aboriginal cultures), or what is commonly known as North America. It is generally used when referring to people who are associated with treaties and is often used interchangeably with the term Indian.

Indian is a term with social and historical significance. It is an erroneous label given to the Indigenous people of this land when Columbus arrived on this hemisphere. This term is also legal terminology and is used in legislation such as the Indian Act, which governs the First Nations people of Canada. Commonly used by many people of Aboriginal ancestry, it is also often used in a derogatory sense. It is a term commonly used by writers in the U.S. as a generic term.

Indigenous is used to refer to the many Peoples across the world, who are the original inhabitants or 'native' to the land they have lived on since time immemorial.

Inuit is the term used to identify the Aboriginal or Indigenous Peoples of the farthest northern point of Canada.

Métis is used in reference to people of mixed Aboriginal and European ancestry. The history of the Métis dates back to the days of the fur trade when Aboriginal people, particularly the Cree, and French or French-Canadian people married. The use of this term is discussed in further detail in Chapter Five.

Native was a term commonly used to identify people born in the area to which reference is made. This term was very commonly used prior to the adoption of the word Aboriginal in the Constitution Act, 1982. It is still used today by Aboriginal people, but is also often heard as a negative reference to Aboriginal people.

CHAPTER ONE

Clarifying My Thoughts

Beginning the Journey

Tanshi, Anin, Tansi, Wotziye,⁴ Hello, and welcome to all of my brothers and sisters, I greet you with an open heart and ask you to sit and join me as we move together through this journey. I thank you Creator for the strength, wisdom, insight and understanding that we find guiding us as we hear the stories, listen to the words, respect the gifts and honour the voices of all who have shared of themselves in so many ways in order for us to journey together. I know you will look after our hearts and care for us with tenderness and love, giving us the strength and courage to hear and the wisdom to understand what our ancestors share with us through these simple words.

Positioning Myself in the Circle

This thesis is about my struggle with identity and colonization/decolonization⁵ within the educational system. It will speak directly to the issues of isolation, belonging, self-esteem, connectedness, and the development of relationships/community within the context of a Métis experience. I will explore my initial lack of understanding of who I am as a Métis person, the cultural exposure I have had including my experiences with racism and my discovery of and struggle with 'voice'. I will pay particular attention to these experiences within the context of both a learner and an educator. I have drawn on

⁴ These are greetings in various Aboriginal languages Tanshi (Michif), Anin (Ojibwe), Tansi (Cree), and Wotziye (Dene).

⁵ Colonization is the act of political, economic and social domination based on a belief of superiority. Decolonization is an act of healing, a process of formally ridding one's mind of the negative impacts of colonization.

my personal journals, reflections and critical incidents, the existing literature and an analysis of my own experiences as a learner, educator, facilitator, consultant and individual to help shape my thesis. Much of my journaling and reflections have occurred over a seven-year period between 1995 and 2002 and they have been used to help clarify the emerging themes, as I understand them.

This thesis is a documentation of my personal struggle to find myself when neither world⁶ would accept me and when being Métis was unacceptable within my own family. It is about my desire to understand the ideas I have internalized and why. It attempts to capture my determination, to recognize where my shame has come from and how I have worked at overcoming that shame to begin walking down the path of understanding, accepting and celebrating who I am. That long and winding path many before me have walked and formally recognized as a decolonization process. It is a path that is worn and difficult, but full of many challenges and victories, both large and small.

One might ask why one would choose to articulate what is an intensely personal journey in such a public way. It is an important question to ask and answer. I believe that many Métis children, youth and adults have found and currently find themselves struggling with very similar experiences. It is inconceivable to me that this journey has been mine alone. The educational and societal environment I found, and continue to operate in, has contributed greatly to the struggles and painful experiences I have endured. Obviously what is required to affect and change the societal environment is a much larger task than my efforts and words will have the ability to influence. However, I do feel that my voice, along with those of others' can and does have the potential to

⁶ This refers to the fact that as a Métis, I often felt that I was not accepted by either the non-Aboriginal people or the First Nations people. I found myself in many instances where I felt like I was the target of both. I elaborate more on this in Chapter Seven.

impact on the educational environment and thus experiences of Métis and Aboriginal students.

In order for the educational environment to change in any meaningful way, it first needs to be recognized, articulated, critically analyzed and then conscious decisions must be made, with clear actions taken, to create an environment that supports, educates and celebrates Aboriginal, and with particular reference to this study, Métis children, youth and others. Sharing my story is an effort to help other educators (Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal) think critically about the messages and the knowledge about the Métis people and their life experiences that they knowingly and unknowingly pass on to both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students. It is about helping educators understand the totality of the experiences and the impact those experiences can have on individual lives and in particular on the development of Métis people. Although I am not convinced that most people and/or educators understand the total impact or intergenerational effects,⁷ there is awareness today of the effects of residential schools and the experiences which occurred within the educational structure. The Aboriginal community has legitimate concerns about the need to have an educational system that recognizes and addresses its needs. My words and the sharing of my experiences will have the ability to impact directly on those involved in the education system at all levels. It is my hope that the articulation of my journey will help to create a greater awareness and understanding of the potential impact individuals have within the educational environment. An awareness and understanding of this potential impact creates the opportunity to consider and reconsider the roles and relationships educators have with Aboriginal and Métis students.

⁷ Various authors have documented the intergenerational effects of residential schools, many of whom I reference in this thesis. Perhaps one of the most extensive documentations occurred through the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples conducted from 1991 – 1996. The report generated as a result of the commission is available at www.ainc-inac.gc.ca/ch/rcap/index_e.html.

We are at a time where initial efforts are being made to address the needs of Aboriginal people. If a greater understanding of the diversity of the people, and therefore both the similar and distinct circumstances and experiences Aboriginal people have is more clearly understood, then as Aboriginal Education evolves these needs can be respected and addressed. Aboriginal Education can indeed ensure that one teaches about concepts; ways of life that are a true reflection of the diversity of the people.

Contextualizing Aboriginal Education

‘Aboriginal Education’, a phrase commonly used in education circles, has many and varied contexts and meanings. Generally, it refers to incorporating an Aboriginal world view into existing curriculum within a specific classroom and specific lesson plans. It is often used in reference to cultural activities during community events or in regards to the educational programming offered in an Aboriginal community within an Aboriginal school system, or from an Aboriginal perspective. Conceptually, it can simply mean education that emanates from a specific worldview, or more broadly, in the context of ensuring educators are adequately knowledgeable in responding to the needs of the Aboriginal community, whether it is in reference to pre-service or in-service training. These are but a few examples of what this term encompasses and it becomes even further complicated when you ask the question, “Aboriginal education for whom and for what purpose?” These are essential questions that need to be addressed in the development of any aspect of Aboriginal education.

There have been many efforts made in the development of curriculum, resources, policies, schools and even Teacher Education programs. In Manitoba, the Department of Education, Culture and Youth has developed or published various resources that

educators can utilize in their curriculum planning processes. These include: Native Studies guides from Kindergarten to Senior 4⁸; an Aboriginal resource guide entitled “The Aboriginal Peoples: Resources Pertaining to First Nations, Métis and Inuit”⁹ (2000); and finally, “Integrating Aboriginal Perspectives into Curricula”¹⁰ (2003), a guide designed to support educators in the integration of Aboriginal perspectives. The Department has also participated in the development of “The Common Curriculum Framework for Aboriginal Language and Culture Programs: Kindergarten to Grade 12”¹¹ (2000), which was a collaborative effort by the Western provinces and the Territories. There have been many resources developed at an organizational¹², divisional¹³, and individual level¹⁴, that also support the ongoing efforts in bringing an Aboriginal perspective into the classroom. Some are material resources such as books, videos, kits and CDs; others include people who are invited into the school or classroom to share specific knowledge. At the same time the Winnipeg School Division has developed an Aboriginal Education Policy¹⁵ and currently supports two Aboriginal schools, Niji

⁸ These guides are designed to be used in conjunction with current Social Studies curriculums for incorporating Aboriginal perspectives into the course or they can be used as stand alone guides for offering Native Studies as a separate credit at the high school level.

⁹ This resource guide is a listing of various classroom resources available through the Departments’ Instructional Resource Unit. The resources contained within it are categorized under First Nations, Métis and Inuit and include many resources from audio, visual, print, and electronic forms. It is updated regularly.

¹⁰ This document was just recently released. It has been developed for the purpose of assisting educators and curriculum developers in the process of integrating Aboriginal perspectives into new and existing curricula.

¹¹ This language curriculum framework was a collaborative effort intended to be a support document for the development of Aboriginal Language curricula, learning resources and/or strategies.

¹² Pemman Publications Inc., a Métis publishing company, has released many Métis specific books for use in the classroom at all levels.

¹³ The Frontier School Division has been involved in many community projects, developed many Aboriginal resource materials, and involved many Aboriginal people, including Elders in various ways throughout the Division.

¹⁴ Métis authors, such as Joe McLellan, continue to capture traditional stories for all to enjoy. He is well known for his ‘Nanabosho’ series. His work is highlighted in “*Métis Legacy*”.

¹⁵ The Winnipeg School Division has a large number of Aboriginal students and families within its catchments area. An Aboriginal Education Policy was developed by the school division in June 1996. The policy speaks to the rationale, philosophy and goals of the division related to Aboriginal Education. It also

Mahkwa and Children of the Earth, within its district boundaries. The Frontier School Division, which has a large Aboriginal population, has also been very active in developing resources and responding to community needs in the area of Aboriginal education.

Although these efforts are positive, it is also accurate to say that many of the resources and overall efforts of individual educators to understand and incorporate Aboriginal perspectives have been done with a First Nations 'view' in mind. This is particularly true of the schools and divisions where Aboriginal students are in the minority. Often when an individual is invited to take part in a particular activity it is a First Nations person demonstrating a First Nations activity. I cannot tell you how many times I have watched a hoop dancer demonstrate their skill at an activity designed to showcase 'Aboriginal' cultural. I have also often been asked to find a resource for a particular class that can speak about the treaties and land entitlement yet there is no planned discussion around the provisions made to the Manitoba Act and the Dominion Lands Act and the resulting effects of the scrip¹⁶ system on the Métis.¹⁷ The issue of addressing the needs of Métis students is not, as yet, really on the agenda within educational structures. There have been some efforts from the Métis community itself, such as the establishment of the Louis Riel Institute¹⁸, Pemmican Publications Inc.¹⁹, and

includes sections on employment equity, Aboriginal awareness programs and race relations. A copy of the policy can be obtained through the school divisions website at www.wsd1.org.

¹⁶ Scrip is a certificate that gives the holder the right to receive payment later in the form of cash, goods, or land.

¹⁷ Further discussion on this is captured in *Native Peoples in Canada; Contemporary Conflicts*, authored by James Frideres, (1993) and published by Prentice-Hall Canada Inc., (pgs. 60-64).

¹⁸ This is the educational institute of the Manitoba Métis Federation (MMF). The MMF is a political organization representing Métis people in Manitoba.

¹⁹ A Métis publishing company located in Winnipeg, associated with the MMF.

the Métis Resource Centre²⁰ but there continues to be little understanding, within the educational community, of the distinctive needs of the Métis.

It is important to recognize that Aboriginal peoples themselves are not static and continually evolve. Aboriginal Education must also continue to evolve if educators are to articulate the diversity and the understandings of Aboriginal Peoples. This is one of the major challenges of Aboriginal Education. This is especially important given the fact that one of the emerging issues of today in Aboriginal Education is the concept of pan-Indianism. Often, Aboriginal Education is presented mainly from a First Nations' perspective without the identification of which group²¹ the knowledge is attributed to, thus leading to a homogenizing of the many diverse cultures and teachings. This is further complicated when Métis students learn from this perspective and internalize it. What develops is a lack of understanding of Métis culture and a belief that First Nations' practices and beliefs are those of the Métis. The loss of traditional understandings, ways of life, cultural activities and language become more of a reality when they are replaced solely with First Nations' understandings, especially if those understandings include a blurring of the various First Nations' teachings. This understanding was captured in the Coalition for the Advancement of Aboriginal Studies (CAAS) report entitled "Learning About Walking in Beauty: Placing Aboriginal Perspectives in Canadian Classrooms". As stated in the report:

There is no single, unified Aboriginal perspective, history or culture just as there is no one history of culture among European Peoples. While conventional Canadian social studies and history curricula have taken up some aspects of identity and culture, they have mixed and matched

²⁰ A Métis resource centre dedicated to developing and sharing Métis resources and instilling pride and knowledge of the Métis culture.

²¹ The First Nations people of Manitoba include the following: Anishinabe (Ojibwe and Saulteaux) Dene, Nahayowak (Cree), Oji-Cree, and Oyata (Dakota). They identify themselves by their linguistic groups and each have their own language, traditions, and histories.

customs, cultures and Peoples to create the hybrid 'Classroom Indian'.
(Coalition for the Advancement of Aboriginal Studies, 2002, p. 76)

Although pan-Indianism²² has been voiced as a concern within the Métis and the larger Aboriginal community, it is still a very common practice. This practice cannot be reversed unless the various 'voices' from within the community are heard. To ensure that in this instance the Métis voice is heard, I feel it necessary to clearly state that my writing is from a Métis perspective.

As stated earlier, there have been some efforts from the Métis and larger Aboriginal community to bring Métis voice to the table. Métis authors and academics are writing and sharing their knowledge. What is not currently articulated very often is our educational experiences. These experiences continue to be hidden, contained in our oral memories. My experiences allowed me to examine my educational experiences through the lenses of both a learner and the educator.

²² Pan-Indianism refers to the influence of some First Nations cultures as various cultures meet and interact in new environments. Haig-Brown articulates further concerns related to this in "*First Nations Adult Education*".

CHAPTER TWO

Coming To Terms with Methodology

Aboriginal/Indigenous Research

There are few studies that address the historical evolution of Métis education, and even fewer that analyze the specific circumstances of Métis students in public schools or post-secondary institutions. Although “Indian control of Indian education” has evolved since the 1970s, there has been much less attention paid to the Métis educational context. In fact, generalizations are often transferred from First Nations education to Métis education without any critical analyses of parallels and divergences. (Dorion & Yang, 2000, p. 176)

As more and more Indigenous²³ voices begin to be heard, the Métis voice must be among them. It is for this reason that the development of my thesis *from a Métis perspective* is crucial. To ensure that my thesis is developed from this perspective, I constantly struggle to understand for myself what is meant by a Métis perspective within the broader context of Aboriginal/Indigenous²⁴ research. As Cree-Metis scholar Cora Weber-Pillwax (2001) so clearly articulates, “I had trouble getting past the idea that I’m an Indigenous person; therefore what I’m doing is going to be Indigenous research” (p.168).

The area of Aboriginal/Indigenous research is growing and evolving in ways barely imagined just a few short years ago. Indigenous researchers such as Cajete, 1994; Cole, 2000; Fitznor, 2002; Graveline, 2002; Hampton, 1995; and Smith, 1999 to name a few, have paved the way by using methodologies that reflect and are consistent with

²³ Indigenous is a term used to identify the many peoples across the world who are native to the land they originally occupied.

²⁴ The use of Aboriginal/Indigenous is my attempt to recognize the term Aboriginal which is commonly used within Canada. This term was established through legislation when the Constitution Act of 1982 was passed which refers to Aboriginal people as Metis, Inuit and Indian in Section 35 (2). I further explain the use of various terms in describing my struggle with identity in Chapter 5.

Aboriginal/Indigenous knowings and processes. As Cardinal (2001) helps us to understand, these are not 'new' methodologies but rather those practices and activities that are reflective and consistent with our ways of being:

Essentially, I am saying Indigenous research methods and methodologies are as old as our ceremonies and our nations. They are with us and have always been with us. Our Indigenous cultures are rich with ways of gathering, discovering, and uncovering knowledge. They are as near as our dreams and as close as our relationships. (p.182)

What we see evolving today is the understanding that by asserting our knowings, our concepts, our ways in the research process, we are better able to understand and articulate what is really occurring. By respecting and honouring the traditional protocols, teachings and philosophies, Indigenous researchers are creating understandings that have the potential, not only to broaden the overall understanding of what constitutes research, but also to educate 'others' in our ways of 'seeing and being'. Weber-Pillwax (2001) speaks to an understanding of the potential effects of Indigenous research methodologies on the individual in her article "Orality in Northern Cree Indigenous Worlds", published in the *Canadian Journal of Native Education*. She describes Indigenous research methodologies as "those that enable and permit Indigenous researchers to be who they are while engaged actively as participants in research processes that create new knowledge and transform who they are and where they are" (p.156).

What makes my thesis one that is written within a Métis/Indigenous paradigm? The answer to this question, I believe, lies within the journey I have undertaken throughout this process. It lies within my understanding of who I am and what my values and beliefs are as a human being, a Métis person, and one who is a member of the larger Indigenous community. As Cree scholar Laara Fitznor (2002) has so eloquently shared in her thesis entitled "Aboriginal Educators' Stories: Rekindling Aboriginal

Worldviews”, despite the fact that there are many diverse cultures, languages and histories within the many Indigenous Nations, there are also “some common elements that are dictated by geographic and cultural boundaries” (p.65).

There are teachings that I have received that I believe to be integral to the Métis community. I have been gifted these understandings from many different teachers. My first teacher was and is my father. Through his actions and words, I have learned much about what it means to live life in a good way, to take care of my family, guide my children and honour all that Mother Earth shares with us. He has taught me to be respectful and caring to others and to never forget where we have come from, what we have struggled through and the lessons life has taught us. Others in my life that I have had the honour of learning from include Elders, traditional teachers, other scholars, and many individuals I hold close to my heart.

Many of the Métis teachings I have received are also shared with the larger Indigenous community. These teachings include: an understanding that we come together in a respectful, genuine way; that we value our interconnectivity and relationships with all life, and our ‘Creator’; that we live in harmony and balance with the world around us; that our relationships are reciprocal and non-interfering; and that we share humour and laughter, stories, oral history, music, creativity, ceremonies, teachings, traditional medicines and food²⁵. The teachings are based on the understanding that as people we are relational beings. Cohen (2001) addresses this when he speaks to the Okanagan world view:

A central element of Okanagan world view - and, I venture, Indigenous world view generally - is the belief that humans are not the supreme

²⁵ Many Indigenous scholars speak to the concept of understandings including Cajete (1994), Ermine (1995), Graveline (2002), and Little Bear (2000).

beings on the planet; and that although humans are pretty special, our health and vitality are directly related to the health and vitality of the natural world of which we are a part (p. 142).

Our livelihood and by extension, health and happiness, are directly linked to the relationships in our lives. These are the relationships with all beings not just human beings. This relationship affects how we move through the world and how we respect and honour all of life and creation. This means as part of our research activities, we consider those lessons or teachings that come to us in different forms and in many different ways. Although I believe I understood this intuitively, it has been brought to the forefront in my thinking throughout my research. Steinhauer (2001) articulates the same experience when she shares the following:

By the end of the course I had discovered that there are teachings all around us. As an Indigenous researcher I became aware that our ancestors relied on these teachings and on their relationship to all living and nonliving things, including the cosmos. The discovery of this whole notion of teaching and relationships remains a powerful component that continues to impress my research today (p.185).

Understanding that we are relational beings requires that one accept that Indigenous research is also relational and carries within it a responsibility to the community that cannot be set aside. As part of that responsibility, I must consider how my work informs and relates to the current educational activities within the Métis community and the Aboriginal community as a whole. There is also the aspect of how educators, both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal, understand and respond to the stories that I share. Although I cannot speak for others nor have a direct influence on their day to day activities, if this work causes one educator to reflect, reconsider and act in a way that is more inclusive and more understanding of the needs of Métis students, I will have

created the opportunity to affect at least one relationship. This is a concept I will come back to as I 'close the circle' in Chapter 8.

Visioning as Research

The term visioning within a Western educational context might take the form of a vision of the school or an understanding of the mission statement of a particular school or school division. Within the Aboriginal community, visions play a vital role in understanding and affecting our lives. Visions and visioning are a part of our daily lives on an ongoing basis. They help us to 'see' things in ways we had not in the past. They guide us, if we let them, and inform us, if we are open to their teachings. In my efforts to help the reader understand the concept of visioning from a more holistic perspective I offer the words of a respected Indigenous scholar:

Visioning embodies and focuses our creative power to visualize and realize new entities in communion with others and with our spirit. Visions always mirror what we deem sacred and intimately important to us. Also, visions relate, and act to integrate, all aspects of our lives. Visions are always about our individual movement towards wholeness. Whether the visions are for and about ourselves, our work, our community, or the whole world, they affect us at our deepest level of being. Honoring and living through vision is a quintessential learning process. Living through vision engenders living for a purpose and, as such, significantly enhances the meaning and quality we find in living. Vision forms a contextual frame of reference through which we can measure, relate, and act during our daily lives (Cajete, 1994, p.145).

I prayed and thought long and hard about the appropriateness of writing about and sharing the experience that follows. The decision to share one's vision is sacred and very personal. However, after careful consideration, I realized that these experiences are a part of Indigenous research. They have influenced the analytical and reflective process I have gone through and they continue to inform and shape my understandings. Quite often, as I was reflecting and writing, I would find that various experiences/visions that I

had previously experienced drifted forward to my 'conscious' self. Some I have included through my analytical responses, others I have articulated by writing about the actual experience, as is the case here.

During the summer of 1995, I had the opportunity to share time and experiences with a wonderful group of people who were participating in the same institute as me called "Minigowinan: Celebration of Differences". The course offered by the University of Manitoba, through their Continuing Education department, was developed from an Aboriginal Worldview and taught by a traditional teacher. As part of our activities within the course we were required to keep a daily journal of our experiences. What follows is the entry I made after arriving home from a day spent on the land, learning in a traditional way. On this particular day, a traditional teacher had been offered tobacco to spend the day with us and guide us through a Wolf Teaching.

MINIGOWIN: CELEBRATION OF DIFFERENCES

Daily Journal

Friday, July 14th, 1995

As I write, I am both exhilarated and exhausted. The Wolf Teaching was amazing in its intensity yet I know that I barely scratched the surface of understanding.

My Wolf Spirit appeared in my vision demonstrating generations of wisdom as she looked down upon me. When she first appeared on the side of the winter mountain, through the trees, my first thought was that I was remembering a movie scene and so I tried to push it out of my mind. But I could not and after a short time I realized that this was my vision.

I could imagine my wolf gently carrying her pups in her mouth to a safe, secure place. I could see the sharp razor edge of her teeth so gently collecting her pups and the graceful, silent, sure movements she used to ensure their security. I felt that she was alone. There was no male wolf in her life but she was very capable of caring for her young and herself. She had all the wisdom of her ancestors to help her on this journey. As I write this I am starting to recognize that I too will be fine as I too have all the wisdom of my grandfathers and grandmothers to help me as I walk the path before me.

There is an 'aloneness' to my wolf spirit. It has to do with being on her own to care for her pups, but it also has to do with great pain in her life. It is an unbearable pain that

she has been forced to endure. Perhaps it was the loss of her mate/companion or something else. As a result of this pain she is very comforting to her cubs. I am amazed that I know this. I did not this afternoon.

When we had to find our wolf spirit, I chose mine because she was alone. There were many grandfathers around her, even under her, yet I know she was different and alone. The other grandfathers I saw were white and pure. My wolf spirit was alone in the crowd and not pure. The pain of life had reached her. When I got back to my place in the circle I looked and looked at my grandfather wanting to see an image. I was disappointed that I could not see a 'wolf face' on my stone but I continued to look closely. Suddenly I noticed an imprint of a thumbprint on it. It was like a fossil print in the stone. I placed my thumb over that print and pressed hard thinking someone else held this grandfather a lifetime ago. When I removed my thumb the print was gone. I know it was there. As I think back I believe that this is how Creator helped me to realize that my ancestors were with me and will be throughout my journey.

The Wolf Teaching was shared in a circle and guided by a traditional teacher who at one point asked us to go into the center of the circle and choose a 'Wolf Spirit', which was in the form of a rock or stone. These rocks are referred to as 'grandfathers' or 'grandmothers'. In many of our traditional teachings what is shared with us is that the rocks and stones are our grandfathers and grandmothers because they are the oldest living spirits on Mother Earth.

There were many times throughout my journey that I struggled with the question of whether or not I should proceed with my thesis. Often I questioned my abilities, the validity of what I believed to be true, whether or not anyone else would understand and appreciate what it was that I was trying to say, and the affect my work might have on my friends and family. Whenever these thoughts or concerns would come up, I would often go back to my Wolf Vision. I kept my grandfather in a medicine pouch and I would take it out and hold it as I reflected on my experience. Invariably, reflecting on my vision would remind me of the fact that I was not alone because I carried the understandings that have been known for generations. My understandings were not only my words and my voice, but those of my ancestors'. My contribution was one of many that were being

shared to create a better understanding and thus a better environment for the many young ones for whom we all have a responsibility. I began to understand that my thesis/my journey was not and will not be a painless process, but that I had the ability to follow through and see it to fruition because I was not alone even though I felt that way many times. I needed to understand that what I saw and understood at first glance was not necessarily true. I needed to take the time to reflect, analyze, dream and envision with my ancestors and 'all my relations'. Whenever I found myself struggling, I would go and talk to people and spend time on the land reacquainting myself with my ancestors. I was always encouraged by those who spent time with me, those who seemed to understand my fears and my struggles and encouraged me to continue to move forward.

Storytelling as Methodology

An dah stories you know
dats dah bes treasure of all to leave your family.
Everyting else on dis eart
he gets los or wore out.
But dah stories
dey las forever.

(Dah Teef, in Maria Campbell's
Stories of the Road Allowance People,
1995, p. 144)

Storytelling has always been a large part of Aboriginal Peoples lives. In 'Look to the Mountain: An Ecology of Indigenous Education' Cajete (1994) shares with us that "Stories were the first ways humans stored information; they were the basis of the oral traditions of all Tribal people" (p.137). Stories have been shared as a way of educating, providing history, sharing traditional knowledge, communicating and as entertainment. Dynamic social concepts and metaphors are carried through traditional stories. Weber-Pillwax (2001) helps us to understand that:

Stories are not frivolous or meaningless; no one tells a story without intent or purpose. A person's word is closely bound up with the story that she or he tells. A person's word belongs to that person and in some instances can be viewed as being that person, so words - in particular some words in some contexts - are not carelessly spoken (p. 156).

Storytelling is a process used to address and resolve issues of serious concern to the community. Generally, storytelling becomes a unifying and consensus building process that allows one to be both analytical and reflective. The stories shared contribute understanding to the collective while allowing for a diversity of thoughts, feelings, opinions and viewpoints. Storytelling is seen as an Aboriginal pedagogy as Archibald (2001) helps us to understand when she shares the following:

I [also] learned to appreciate how stories engage us as listeners and learners to think deeply and to reflect on our actions and reactions. Simon (Chief, Dr. Simon Baker, Elder, Squamish Nation) told many of his life experience stories using this method, which is pedagogy. I called this pedagogy 'storywork' because the engagement of story, storyteller, and listener created a synergy for making meaning through the story and making one 'work' to obtain meaning and understanding (p.1).

The act of choosing to share my 'stories' as a way of exploring 'Métis experiences' within our educational systems was very natural for me. I have always loved stories whether I have been the receiver or the teller. Cajete (1994) indicates that:

Story is the way humans put information and experience in context to make it meaningful. Even in modern times we are all one and all storied and storying beings (p. 137).

The struggle in incorporating this method was that my research could include both oral storytelling and narrative, but the presentation and thus interpretation of my work would be in a narrative form as the medium I am using is in print not oral. As such, careful consideration had to be given to how this changes the understanding of storytelling and what the relationship is between oral storytelling and narrative, which I consider to be a written form. For me, that understanding is in recognizing that there are

different types of stories. During my journey in developing my thesis, I incorporated both oral storytelling and journaling, which were experiences or 'stories' that were written about during a reflective process. The decision to use a particular journal entry was a strategy I incorporated that I believe is connected to a storytelling process. By incorporating a selected journal entry, I was determining how to 'tell my story' in such a way as to connect particular experiences, both the actual and the reflective aspects of the experience, to the story being told through my thesis.

Action Research

In March of 1995 I had been given the opportunity to develop a Native Awareness course and had been connecting with many of the Aboriginal students in the building where I worked. At the same time, because it was evident that many students were spending time with me, I had more and more teachers and administrators asking me to become involved in other areas regarding these students. This included meetings between students and teachers and/or administrators when issues arose, participation in meetings and sessions with parents, requests for speaking in various classes, and suggestions for resources for many different subject areas, which were coming in quite often. All of this was over and above the regular challenges educators face in developing new courses, balancing their regular course loads, taking care of the administrative duties, preparing daily lessons, evaluating and assessing students and supporting those who were struggling with major life issues.

I remember feeling especially tired at the end of a particularly challenging day and deciding that all I wanted to do was go home. As I prepared to leave, I stopped for a minute to check my daybook to determine whether there were any last minute things I

needed to look after in preparation for the next day. This was when I realized that a meeting was being held at a nearby high school for the purpose of establishing a cohort group to look at research. As I glanced at the information, including the time and location, I decided I was just too tired and would head home instead even though I could still make the meeting. I remember thinking I had enough challenges in my life and why would I want another? At the same time as I was driving, pretty much on autopilot, I kept mulling over in my mind the fact that I needed to better understand research in order to fulfill the requirements of a project I had just started that involved Aboriginal students and the Aboriginal community within our divisional boundaries. My regular route home took me right by the school where the meeting was being held. I sat at the stop sign just outside that building for about thirty seconds telling myself I should just go home. Yet during that time I had this feeling in my gut that I should turn left, pull into the parking lot and go in, even if only for a little while.

Intuition has always been a guiding force in my life. I learned from an early age to use it and have often found it to be one of my key 'survival' tools throughout my life experiences. The understanding of intuition being an essential tool given to us by Creator to help us as we journey through life is a common understanding shared by many Aboriginal groups. I believe it was this same force that led me to 'turn left' at the stop sign instead of continuing on straight and heading home that spring day.

This was how I was introduced to Action Research and when I began my journey as a graduate student with a desire to pursue my Master's degree. The decision to do this was more an intuitive decision rather than one that was carefully researched and thought through. This is thought to be an aspect of Aboriginal consciousness as Adams (1995) helps us to understand when he states that "An authentic Aboriginal consciousness is an

intrinsic or inner essence that lies somewhere between instinct, and intuition, and it evolves from the humanness and spirituality of our collective, Aboriginal community” (p.45).

One of the requirements for receiving the funding to support the program I referred to earlier was that I would collect appropriate data related to our progress. I had never done this before and did not feel comfortable with my knowledge of how best to proceed. Sitting in a meeting I never intended to attend, I was suddenly presented with a process that would allow me to learn how to do what I was required to do. How could I say no? As a result of the meeting, I suddenly found myself pursuing a degree I never had any intention of pursuing and now sharing a story I had never intended to tell. *Isn't it interesting how one is guided to and through particular life experiences?*

Not being a person who has ever really been interested in the whole area of research and has in fact considered it to be an area that has created a great deal of ‘damage’ in the Aboriginal community²⁶, I was pleasantly surprised with what I learned about action research, the process itself and its potential. Action research is a set of methodologies in which researchers pursue change and understanding at the same time. This notion of change as growth rather than distinct action is essential in understanding action research and its potential. The pursuit of change to support growth is informed through reflection and thus understanding. This is a cyclical process where one alternates between critical reflection and action, one continually informing and influencing the other. Another key aspect of action research is that it is a systemic inquiry designed to

²⁶ Indigenous scholar, Linda Tuhiwai Smith(1999) critically examines the historical and philosophical base of Western research. She further articulates the importance of Indigenous researchers, working from within an Indigenous context. She shares stories of research and examples of projects that enable the reader to contextualize the impact of Indigenous research not only in the decolonization process, but more importantly in making meaning and practical designs to address social issues within the wider framework of self-determination, decolonization, and social justice.

yield results that enable educators to improve their practice. At the same time this process and practice, the 'results' if you will, of the research is made public for the scrutiny and use of others. Storytelling, from an Aboriginal perspective can also be shared for the same purpose. Stories are shared for a variety of reasons, some of those being to help someone reflect on their behaviour and through reflection, make choices that would enable them to make decisions that might be more beneficial to their situation.

Narrative Inquiry

I had been exposed to this methodology in one of our graduate courses where we looked at some of the work of various researchers involved in narrative inquiry. My understanding of narrative inquiry is that it is the study of people's life experiences or rather the way humans experience the world. It is the collecting, retelling and characterization of lived experiences which in turn creates new stories. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) share this understanding when they state that "The contribution of a narrative inquiry is more often intended to be the creation of a new sense of meaning and significance with respect to the research topic than it is to yield a set of knowledge claims that might incrementally add to knowledge in the field" (p.42). As I moved through the process of exploring what had and was happening in my life with regards to my educational experiences, I realized that in order to create better understanding I would need to tell my story. Reaching this decision had not been easy for me as I knew it would be a painful experience, but as Clandinin and Connelly (2000) indicate:

One of the starting points for narrative inquiry is the researcher's own narrative of experience, the researchers' autobiography. This task of composing our own narratives of experience is central to narrative inquiry. We refer to this as composing narrative beginnings as a researcher begins his or her inquiries (p.70).

As much as I attempted to connect to the literature I had been reading and reviewing, it seemed that there were aspects of my own personal experiences that were not really articulated and certainly not in the context of an urban experience. There were a few exceptions, like Métis authors Maria Campbell and Howard Adams, but their work was not specifically on their educational experiences. The use of narrative inquiry allows me to use my voice, share my stories and interweave my experiences from the past and present in order to influence the future. It creates the opportunity for me to consider my students' stories, their experiences and their view of the educational environment they found themselves in, which in turn helps to influence my selection of stories. "In understanding ourselves and our students educationally we need an understanding of people with a narrative of live experiences. Life's narratives are the context for making meaning of school situations" (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p.70).

I have always used journaling as a way to 'think through' whatever I am struggling with. When it came time to make some decisions regarding what my story was evolving into and the process I might use to tell it, I realized that the methodology of narrative inquiry was closely aligned to my natural way of thinking and processing information. This was not very surprising to me as I was finding narrative inquiry to be closely associated with Métis processes of understanding as well. Not only is storytelling an integral part of Métis culture, but when I speak of myself, as Anderson (2000) indicates "it is an Aboriginal method of contextualizing knowledge" (p.21). With this understanding in mind, I was able to come to the understanding that narrative inquiry would be the vehicle I use for sharing or representing what I have learned and come to understand.

CHAPTER THREE

OPENING THE CIRCLE

Understanding the Affects of Colonialism – The first layer

I was always surprised at the weight of the door. It took both hands to pull it open and you had to be careful about how you closed it or the thump would echo throughout the halls announcing you had arrived. I learned pretty quickly how to slip in quietly, both into the apartment block and the suite itself.

During my middle years, I attended a high school that was about a 25-minute walk from home so going home at lunch wasn't really an option. My grandfather lived closer to the school so we would go there for lunch. The apartment block he lived in was a low rental unit and was home to many individuals and families who were battling their own demons, much like my grandfather. He served time in the Second World War and encountered many difficulties upon his return to civilian life. Life in general, as was the case with many veterans, was not easy and by this time in my life his struggle with alcoholism was a daily battle. I both loved and hated going there for lunch. I loved to see his big smile and listen to him talk, I could almost feel his voice booming in my chest, it seemed so deep. The sound of his laughter was like water skipping over the rocks in a brook, so full of life, so full of joy. These were the good days, the ones where he was able to stay sober until after we had come and gone. Unfortunately there were more of the darker days, ones where he lost that battle long before we arrived.

I remember the smell most of all. It was an interesting one, one you would pick up just as you first entered the block, before climbing the stairs to the apartment. There was a particularly sweet stench that first assaulted you, then underneath it, as you got

closer you could make out the smell of fried baloney and as soon as you entered the suite your nostrils filled with the wonderful scent of fresh, hot bannock. I found myself going through a variety of emotions as I moved through that building everyday. Emotions that even today I associate with those scents. Apprehension and trepidation were generally first as I struggled to continue on into the building when the smell first assaulted me. There was a sense of hopefulness, of understanding that this was only temporary and that a pleasant, warm experience would soon engulf me if I could only push forward hard enough and get through the initial assault. As I moved through the block, the scent of the baloney frying seemed to welcome me, causing a slow smile to cross my face as my spirits lifted in an anticipatory and hopeful way. Finally, as I opened the door and breathed in the warm, delicious smell of the fresh bannock a sense of calm and comfort would slowly engulf me. These feelings however would hold for a mere fraction of a second because it was always automatic that as I closed the door, I held my breath and listened carefully to the sounds around me. Sometimes I would pause in the doorway, trying to hold onto the feeling, but generally it was fleeting as the reality of what might happen next was never far away. The kitchen was immediately on my left and the living room was at the end of the hall. I would wait to hear my grandfather's voice before I decided to either slip into the kitchen or go straight to the living room and say hello. If he spoke in a clear, lighthearted fashion I always went in to see him and talk before eating. If he spoke in a heavy, slurred fashion, I knew to slip into the kitchen, eat quickly and head back to school unnoticed.

The Goal of Colonization

Interestingly enough, without the arrival of the Europeans we, the Métis, would not exist as a people, yet that same arrival brought devastation to the Indigenous peoples of this land, strong vibrant peoples who have existed here since time immemorial. Colonialism, as a process, began over 500 years ago and continues today. Historically, educational systems, social policies and economic development plans were established with the intent to extinguish Aboriginal rights as well as assimilate Aboriginal people. This has been well documented by various Indigenous authors such as Adams, 1995 & 1989; Anderson, 2000; Battiste, 2000; Campbell, 1973; Cardinal, 1999; Cole, 2000; Culleton, 1983; Little Bear, 2000; Monture-Angus, 1999; Smith, 1999; and Youngblood, 2000; to name but a few.²⁷

The underlying goal of colonialism was to negate everything it is to be 'Indian' within a generation and to create a society where there are no Indians. This has never been so clearly articulated than when it was by Duncan Campbell Scott, who was a long-serving deputy superintendent general with the Department of Indian Affairs. As captured in the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (1996), Duncan is quoted as saying "Our object is to continue until there is not a single Indian in Canada that has not been absorbed into the body politic and there is not an Indian question."²⁸ This understanding is further reinforced through the words of the first Prime Minister of Canada, Sir John A. Macdonald, who informed Parliament that "it would be Canada's goal to do away with the tribal system and assimilate the Indian people in all respects

²⁷ For a broader understanding of colonization, including the conceptual frameworks, destructiveness and understandings of a potential postcolonial society, I recommend reading "*Reclaiming Indigenous Voice and Vision*", edited by Marie Battiste, (2000) and published by UBC Press.

²⁸ The page is not cited here as the quote is from the Indian and Northern Affairs website where the *Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples* report is posted <www.ainc-inac.gc.ca/ch/rcap/index_e.html>. This quote is taken from Chapter 6 of that report.

with the inhabitants of the Dominion”.²⁹ Through various strategies and techniques, efforts were made to achieve this goal. These strategies included the use of legislation, policy, educational, social, political, cultural, and economic systems and institutions. The results of these efforts, has created a cognitive legacy commonly referred to as Eurocentrism (Youngblood, 2000). Eurocentrism is the view that Europeans are culturally and politically superior to all people. Youngblood (2000) articulates the tensions associated with Eurocentrism and the ability to eliminate it when he states the following:

In academic professorate, Eurocentrism is a dominant intellectual and educational movement that postulates the superiority of Europeans over non-Europeans. Modernists tend to think of Eurocentrism as a prejudice that can be eliminated in the same way that attempts have been made to eliminate racism, sexism, and religious bigotry. However Eurocentrism is not a matter of attitudes in the sense of values and prejudices. It has been the dominant artificial context for the last five centuries and is an integral part of all scholarship, opinion, and law (p. 60).

There are many different strategies and techniques used when a dominant society sees its’ values and beliefs as superior to others. These are used to ensure the ‘superior’ worldview is the one that is reinforced throughout the societal structures. “European powers first interfered with the internal affairs of Indigenous societies, and gradually established a system to dispossess and suppress Aboriginals” (Adams, 1995, p.143). Within that system there were many tools used by colonizers to reinforce the colonial message of inferiority, including: mythicism, alienation, isolation, manipulation, cultural invasion, repression and oppression. The use of these tools had tragic consequences on the Indigenous peoples. Battiste (2000) speaks to the consequences of the colonial process when she reminds us that “the colonizers created a systemic colonialism and

²⁹ Cited in Chapter 6 of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (1996) report. <http://www.ainc-inac.gc.ca/ch/rcap/index_e.html>.

racism that estranged Indigenous peoples from their beliefs, languages, families, and identities; that deprived Indigenous peoples of their dignity, their confidence, their souls, and even their shadows” (p.29). This understanding is shared by many other Indigenous scholars, including Smith (1999), who draws upon Fanon and other writers in articulating the disorder and devastation imperialism and colonialism have brought to colonized people:

Imperialism and colonialism brought complete disorder to colonized peoples, disconnecting them from their histories, their social relations and their own ways of thinking, feeling and interacting with the world. It was a process of systematic fragmentation. For indigenous peoples fragmentation has been the consequence of imperialism (p. 28).

The devastating effects of colonialism have directly affected and continue to affect myself and all of my family’s lives. When I shared the story earlier of my grandfather and his struggle it was to bring to the forefront, for the reader, the reality of some of the experiences of Aboriginal people, including the Métis. He was not unlike many Métis people who have struggled with alcoholism, welfare dependency, and many other social issues that are a direct affect of colonialism. Let me clarify though, that as difficult as it may be for some people to read that story, to me it is a story of courage, love, and resistance, and I tell it with pride. With all of the experiences my grandfather endured, his daily effort to take part in our lives was and is a reminder of the depth of love he possessed for us. It would have been very easy for him to give in everyday, however, he struggled each and every day to take part in the preparation of our meals and the discussions at the table, to visit with us and share in a small part of our day as often as possible.

Education and Colonization

One of the tools used by the Europeans in their efforts to assimilate the Peoples of this land, as I indicated earlier, was education.³⁰ Whether it was through the day-run institutions, religious schools or the residential systems, the emphasis was the same. The residential schools were particularly devastating because many children who attended them did not return to their families for years or not at all. These schools were in existence across Canada from the late 1880s to the mid 1950s with some operating in Manitoba as late as 1970.

Residential schools were officially designed for First Nations peoples but it is widely understood that many Metis people attended these schools also. Much has been written and spoken of in relation to this aspect of history. Celia Haig-Brown (1988) brings voice to these experiences through her book, *Resistance and Renewal: Surviving the Indian Residential School*. As she interviewed various former students of residential schools some common struggles that Aboriginal people share as a direct result of residential schools were once again reinforced. They included the long term effects of separation from family, community, culture and language.

The documented effects of the European educational process have negatively impacted the lives of Indigenous peoples more so than positively and these effects are still felt today³¹. Although there does exist a growing number of Aboriginal people who have not directly attended residential schools, it has been determined that the effects of

³⁰ For a review of historical developments since 1969, see Longboat, (1987). "First Nations Control of Education: The Path to Our Survival as Nations," in *Indian Education In Canada*, vol. 2, *The Challenge*, Barman, J., Hebert, Y., & McCaskill, D (Eds.).

³¹ More detailed documentation on residential schools and their impacts, historically and currently is available in the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (1996), <http://www.ainc-inac.gc.ca/ch/rcap/index_e.html>.

residential schooling are intergenerational. Monture-Agnus (1999) further acknowledges the awareness of intergenerational effects when she suggests that:

The terror of residential schools is not a terror of the past alone; it constantly recreates itself and continues to transform Aboriginal communities. The loss of parenting skills in one generation, for example, impacts on generation after generation until the loss is fully addressed (p.24).

I cannot speak to the direct educational experiences of my grandfather in terms of the residential school system. As life was not kind to him from an early age, little is known about his actual educational experiences or those of his parents, grandparents. What is known is that he exhibited many of the 'recognized symptoms' residential school survivors have struggled with over time. My paternal grandmother's life experiences are also unknown to me with the exception of the understanding that she also struggled with alcoholism and passed on when my father was young. Bruce (2002) reminds me of the possibility of her life experiences including the residential system, when she suggests that:

A significant proportion of Metis women in Manitoba have attended residential, boarding or missions schools and/or are descendants of people who attended such schools. Metis women generally have been reluctant to discuss the impact or disclose aspects of these experiences and very little information on the effects of residential schools on Metis women, their families and/or their communities is available (p.1).

Even though my grandfather passed on while I was still in high school, he has been there to guide me through many difficulties and continues to even today. Throughout my high school years, and as I struggled to obtain my teaching degree, I would often reflect back on the visits we had. Certainly, his stories, laughter and words of encouragement have remained with me, but I have also thought about how I felt going into the apartment building. The stench and sense of hopelessness that it brought out in

me always made me think, this is a place you could get trapped in and never escape if you weren't careful yet the 'comfort' of knowing you never had to prove yourself to the outside world might be enough to hold you there forever. As scary as this thought is, it has always been the one to motivate me when no other seemed to work.

Conversion to Christianity was a powerful force in the assimilating practices of the European community. Many Christian day schools were established under the guise of converting the 'savages'. Although my father did not attend residential schools, he was educated in the catholic school system. He attended a catholic day school in the St. Boniface area. Although he is not a 'practicing' Catholic today, in the sense of attending church on a regular basis, many of the teachings he received through the school system are a part of how he lives his life. Incorporated within these are the understandings and traditional teachings, the 'ways of being' that have been shared from our Cree and Métis ancestors.

I now understand, as a result of this journey, that many of the teachings I have received, certainly from my father but also from many others, are in fact Métis teachings. How these teachings are encompassed within the concept of Métis spiritualism is an area that has not been studied very much and has in fact been neglected in the literature. Currently, the emphasis has been on how the Métis have embraced various forms of European religions, the role of missionaries, and the residential schools impact. A more in depth understanding and the articulation of Métis spirituality is required.

The Loss of Language

“My granfawder his name he was Kannap
but dah whitemans dey call him Jim boy
so hees Indian name he gets los.
Dats why we don know who his peoples dey are.
We los lots of our relations like dat.
Dey get dah whitemans name
Den no body
He knows who his peoples dey are anymore.

But all dis trouble you know
he start after we get dah new names
cause wit dah new names
he come a new language an a new way of living.
Once a long time ago
I could've told you dah story of my granfawder Kannap
An all his peoples but no more.
All I can tell you now
Is about Jim Boy
An hees story hees not very ole.

(Jacob, in Maria Campbell's
Stories of the Road Allowance People,
1995, p.89)

When the Europeans arrived and the use of the English language grew, many English names were assigned to people and places. This is particularly destructive when a society is based in orality and all of its history and knowledge is based solely in the language. With Aboriginal societies the renaming process was yet another form of Euro-colonial behaviour being imposed. In bringing Jacob's voice forward, Maria Campbell shares the enormity of the implications of this behaviour by helping us to realize that the implications are beyond just the words and stretch into all aspects of their lives. Not being able to connect family members to each other, the loss of history, access to traditional knowledge, culture, etc. are just some of the results of imposing English names on Aboriginal peoples.

The language of a people is the heart of its culture. They are intrinsically woven together, inseparable: if the language and culture die, the people cease to exist as a people. The Métis, just as other Aboriginal peoples, have their own languages and cultures. The Métis are a very diverse group and the languages, including Cree, Ojibwe, Oji-Cree, French, English, and Michif, they spoke and continue to speak reflect this (Dorian & Prefontaine, 2001). References to the variety of languages spoken by Métis people are threaded throughout Shore and Barkwell's (1997) "Past Reflects the Present: The Métis Elders' Conference". The languages spoken in Métis communities are dependent on the communities people grew up in and the mixture of languages spoken in the community. The Michif language itself grew out of the fur trade and is a mixture of French and Indigenous languages (Bakker, 2001). In Manitoba, the Michif language is mainly Cree and French, although it also 'borrows' some verbs, sounds and nouns from Ojibwe.

In my family, my father wanted all of us to be able to speak French and so he insisted we take it at school. Our homework was usually done at the kitchen table and sometimes my father would look over what we were doing. Initially, he would look over the words and attempt to help us when we were having difficulties. After a period of time though, he stopped. When I asked him about it years later he indicated that he didn't speak proper French and didn't want us to get confused. Today, he does not speak any of his language. I often wonder if the French he spoke was actually Michif. It is important to note that the ability to retain a language is tied to the use of it in the home as:

The family also plays an important role in preserving languages. If a language is not spoken at home, its chances of survival are limited. Many Métis parents and grandparents themselves have lost Aboriginal languages and so cannot pass them on. Even where senior family members do know

a language, they sometimes will not speak it because it is seen as irrelevant to modern life or as a badge that attracts racist discrimination. (Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, 1996, Volume 5, Chapter 6)

The destruction of language was, and is, a part of the process of colonization, and was implemented through the Residential Schools system. There is much recorded (Adams, 1995; Haig-Brown, 1988; Bruce, 2002, Frideres, 1993; York, 1990; and Young, 1997) on the efforts through the residential school system to eliminate Aboriginal languages. The documentation of punishments for speaking ones' language is also reflected throughout Indigenous writings. As I indicated earlier, many Métis people were educated in the residential school systems and as a result lost their languages. As the Europeans continued to enforce a process of assimilation and colonization, the importance of using the education system grew in priority. Barman, Hebert, and McCaskill (1992) remind us that:

The key to the future of any society lies in the transmission of its culture and worldview to succeeding generations. The socialization of children, through education, shapes all aspects of identity, instilling knowledge of the group's language, history, traditions, behaviour, and spiritual beliefs (p.1).

Education, a Process for Reclaiming, Regaining, and Healing

Although, historically education has been used in a destructive manner with regards to Aboriginal peoples, it can be used as a tool for rebuilding and healing if it is inclusive of Aboriginal perspectives. This has been recognized by many Aboriginal scholars and educators, including: Battiste, 2000; Cajete, 1994; Fitznor, 1995; Hampton, 2000; and Young 1997.

If education is to be used to facilitate healing and rebuilding, it will require educators to recognize that many youth don't realize that they have been colonized, just as I was

unaware. Urban Aboriginal youth in particular need to learn about their history from an Aboriginal perspective. Although it is improving, there have been limited opportunities for them to learn about their people and their experiences, yet this understanding is an essential aspect of decolonization and the development of identity. Francis (2003) maintains that:

To reclaim their identity, American Indian urban youth need to learn the stories of the People. They need to learn, remember, and tell the ancient origin and migration stories, the stories that focus on Native values, attitudes, and beliefs. And they need to tell new stories about growing up and living urban lives. These new stories need to incorporate the wisdom of the People about the land and the relatedness of all creation. To tell new urban stories requires learning about the People who first inhabited the land in the urban area where they live now. Once these stories are learned, it is important to tell stories about those People. They need to tell stories of their accomplishments and tragedies. What they believed and experienced. Link those stories with those of the People from whom urban Native youth are descended. It is in the stories, old and new, where urban Native youth will be able to reclaim their Native identity. They will be able to know their harmonious place in the order of all creation (p. 79).

I recognize that this is not an easy task for educators. They also were not taught, either in own schooling or through teacher education programs, about Aboriginal history. Many of today's current educators have been raised in a society filled with biases and educated in a Eurocentric system. As Hampton (1995) articulates:

It is understandable that the educator with a self-concept tied to the ideal of helping children, with preparation that does not include multicultural competence (*and I would add corrective history*), with a curriculum that ignores or systemically distorts the culture of his or her students, and with unresolved personal issues of racism and ethnocentrism could not recognize the extent to which education is both culturally bound and actively hostile to Native culture (p.36).

If educators have not been educated about Aboriginal knowledge, experiences and 'ways of being', how can they share this knowledge with Aboriginal youth? How can they support these youth who are struggling with the intergenerational effects of

Eurocentrism and don't even realize it? These are essential questions which I address further in Chapters Four, Five, Six and Seven, where I share my experiences as both a learner and educator. What I can say here is that in my mind, the starting point for this in the building of new stories, stories that are based on history and teachings. To me, the starting point for this is trust.

CHAPTER FOUR

Development of Trust – The Second Layer

I remember slowly closing my classroom door, stopping for a moment to look down the hallway for any stragglers, a habit practiced at the start of every class. I stepped into the room with a sinking feeling in my stomach as I looked over at the circle of young people, joking, laughing and just generally being youth. How will they feel one hour from now? When would be the best time to tell them, at the beginning of class, near the end... how do I tell them? This was not an isolated thought, but rather one I had been struggling with for weeks. The only difference today was that I had just found out that some of the other students already knew, so I could no longer put it off. I was about to do something to a group of young people that I vowed I would never do. I was going to become yet another person in their lives who would disappoint them after they had finally let their guards down and begun to trust me. How was I going to tell them that I was leaving?

After 12 years of teaching at that high school, I was leaving. After 6 years of consciously searching out and reaching out to the Aboriginal youth who attended school in the complex, which also includes a middle years school, I was leaving. After four weeks of building trust with the students sitting in our circle, I was leaving. The only Aboriginal teacher in the complex was leaving. How would I explain that to them? How would I explain to the young people sitting in the circle, in the halls, in the school next to us, in the elementary school we'd been working in for three years, in the community, in my life, that I would no longer be found in my classroom, my office, or the school?

The Sweetness of the Pear

As I reflected on my life and what has brought me to this point I was able to remember the people who have been there for me. One woman in particular made an enormous difference for me. Her actions carried me through many, many years of painful experiences. We moved into the area approximately three weeks after school started and I joined the grade one class at the neighbourhood school just down the block from our home. Unfortunately most of the groups of friends had already been established, and being the quiet, shy child that I was I could not seem to find a way to be included. Many a recess was spent sitting on the side watching the children playing together and feeling very alone and very much an outsider. Those short fifteen minute time slots felt like the longest minutes of my life. Fortunately, after a period of time my grade one teacher recognized what was going on for me and she started coming out during recess and sitting and talking with me. Perhaps what I remember most about those visits was that she always brought out two pieces of fruit. One, an apple she ate, and the other a pear she gave to me. I'll never forget the taste of those pears. I don't believe I had ever had one before and didn't know what it was but I ate it anyway.

The respect that I have for this educator is enormous. She had the ability to see what was going on, assess the situation and then respond to it in such a way as I was able to accept what she had to offer and trust in her actions. Since my arrival at that school, my experiences had already sent me a pretty clear message that I did not belong. My peers were telling me through their actions that I was different, somehow less than. The loneliness I felt when I sat and watched everyone laughing and playing, talking, and just generally enjoying each other, was almost unbearable. The awareness of the fact that I

was not a part of any groups and would always 'sit on the outside' was a part of my daily experiences.

Education and Success: Understanding the Trade off

Messages such as the ones I received in my first year of schooling would continue to 'assault' me throughout my educational experiences³². They were there in many different forms during my elementary, middle and senior years experiences. I have and continue to struggle with them, throughout my efforts to attain my post-secondary education. At the same time, they have been prevalent in my experiences as an educator and as a consultant. What I find surprising is the fact that I continued to push on, that I held on to my desire to 'be successful' even though I encountered many instances of racism, discrimination, and oppression. It is only through the self-reflective process I have been in that I have been able to understand why this struggle has been an ongoing one for me. Antone (2001) and Young (1997) both make reference to the desire to be 'successful' and the price one pays as a result. Antone (2001) admits that:

I did not understand anything about the underlying Euro-western principles that Native schools were built on. I only knew that I was made to feel inferior; and that if I "worked" hard enough maybe some day I would be just like the white people who were running the schools and every other system I was affiliated with. I did not understand that the objective of the school system was to assimilate the Native people so we would no longer know who we were and would take on only the values of the dominant society (p. 94).

³² Authors Cajete, 1994; Deloria, 1996; Fitznor, 1998; Graveline, 1998; Smith, 1999; Young, 1997; Youngblood, 1995 speak to the injustices and oppressions that have and still do dominate our daily lives.

The Complexities of Inferiority

The realization of how pervasive these feelings have been only came to light for me when I was taking a course with Dr. Judith Newman during my pursuit of my Master's Degree. Part of our course work included journaling and periodically she would ask us to review and reflect on our previous journals to determine where we were going in our 'understandings' as educators. It was through these activities that I began to understand what impact those ongoing experiences had had on me not only in terms of feeling inferior, but also on my ability to trust others. I became much more aware of how important the ability to trust is in the whole educational process. The journal entry below captures some of my thoughts in the area of trust and its relationship to teaching. It speaks to understanding what it means to be a teacher and how our relationships can be affected with each other and with our students when trust is or is not present.

June 14, 1996

I took time this week to look back at my previous reflections to try to see where I am going with this course. I realize that this is part of our task for next week but felt that I needed to take stock at this point and time. One issue that leapt out at me is that I am/we are redefining, rediscovering, reaffirming what a teacher is. Perhaps some of us are.

I wrote about how important collaborating has become to me. I think it always was but I did not recognize it. In my third reflection, Judith you asked me why collaborating is so important to me and as I thought about it more and more I was forced to look at the underlying needs I have as an individual. At first I wrote to myself what I thought were the reasons. These included the opportunity to learn from other professionals, to measure what I am doing against what others are doing, (I guess to see if I am 'doing it' right), to get support from others when I need it, and even to make myself 'feel' like I am one of the better teachers (this sounds so self-righteous but if I am being truthful then I must include it).

As I thought further I realized that all of the above are true, however, some of them are 'surface' reasons and in fact as I look deeper I realize that I am looking for a 'real' relationship with other teachers. One that is not superficial but rather one that has more

depth, more meaning. Judith, this is scary because I know by how I am feeling right now that I am standing on the edge of something and still afraid to leap.

I have spent all of my life looking for 'real' relationships, those which have more depth than what I was allowed to have. I am a teacher because it was an opportunity that presented itself which would give me access to 'real' relationships. That pear, so many years ago symbolizes for me the first 'real' relationship in my life beyond my family.

The most important feature of collaborating that makes it different than what I have done in the past is more than likely the issue of trust. If you can share with a colleague what you are doing, good or bad, right or wrong and look to them for input, guidance, acceptance, etc. you must have a certain level of trust. This is definitely something we dealt with at the beginning of our course and still deal with. I know that I am more trusting now of the other people in our course but still 'careful' to some extent.

It is extremely important to me to have a trusting relationship with my students. As I look at my Native Awareness class I realize that we definitely have a lot of trust going on here and I think that has allowed for a lot of success for this particular group.

What does trust mean to me? The dictionary defines it as:

- 1 a) firm belief or confidence in the honest, integrity, reliability, justice, etc. of another person or thing; faith; reliance
- b) the person or thing trusted
- 2 confident expectation, anticipation or hope
- 3 a) the fact of having confidence placed in one
- b) responsibility or obligation resulting from this

I see trust as an integral part of any relationship one considers to be more than casual. I see teaching as more than casual and so I feel trust must be a large factor of that relationship. Trust to me is being able to count on a person; believing their word and having faith in their actions. Understanding that trust is a two way endeavour and so conducting yourself in the same manner. How does this fit with my teaching? I have no problem looking at my student relationships and understanding where it factors in, but when it comes to my colleagues I am unsure.

I think it may have a lot to do with being unsure of whether I am equal to them or not. Do I subconsciously layer my relationships with adults? Do I more easily trust students because I feel that I am on a higher level than them and can easily make the choice to have a deeper relationship with them? Is there no risk to myself if I extend the invitation because I expect them to pick it up and if they don't it is their choice not mine, therefore their responsibility not mine. If I extend the invitation to a colleague, I may in fact extend it to someone who is 'better' than me and they may in fact choose not to accept it. Where do I go then? There is indeed a lot more risk here for me than with students. What about the 'power' behind the hierarchy? Where does that come into play? I think I am starting something that will require a lot more reflection. I have not gone here before but obviously I will need to reflect on this a lot more.

Certainly as I reread this journal entry, I see the word 'trust' all over it, but what I also see are the issues of inferiority, authority, and power. When I wrote about measuring myself against other educators to see if I'm 'doing it right' it reinforced for me how easily I slide into feelings of inferiority. Sometimes it seems like no matter how 'successful' I am, I cannot feel that I am doing a good job. Adams (1995) articulates how difficult this struggle is as a result of the connections between racism, stereotypes, oppression and feelings of inferiority. He maintains that "It is almost impossible not to develop feelings of inferiority and inadequacy. Racism contributes greatly to our oppression, as Aboriginal people are bombarded by debasing stereotypes. Negative perceptions reinforce feelings of inferiority (p. 43). My seeing my colleagues as having 'power' over me, and somehow our being in a hierarchical relationship, even though we were all classroom teachers, is indicative of how much of a strangle hold these negative perceptions can have.

Developing Trust with Métis Youth

The ability to build trust is, I believe, key to being able to reach learners and to counter some of the experiences Métis³³ youth have already encountered. How it is built and what it looks like in an educational environment will vary. My efforts to create an environment that 'connected' with Métis youth included creating a physical environment in which students could relate to; one that was reflective of Aboriginal, both First Nations and Métis, ways of life. To achieve this I had to ensure that my choices related to curriculum and resources were appropriate. It also meant ensuring that my students

³³ Although I reference Métis youth specifically, it should be understood that most Aboriginal peoples share similar histories and experiences, and as a result, are struggling with the same issues.

'voices' were heard. They needed to be able to express what they thought and felt and needed to feel safe in doing so. Our actions in the classroom, not just our words, had to send a clear message that whether or not there was agreement with what they said there was appreciation for them sharing it. They needed to feel visible and respected within the school environment itself and my classroom, physical presence and our relationship played an essential part in that.

As I worked through these understandings and the related experiences, I spent a great deal of time capturing my decisions, actions and the reactions occurring in my classroom. Through journaling, I was able to reflect on what was occurring, react to it and measure the responses over a period of time. It was as a result of this process that I wrote the entry that follows:

Jan 31, 1998

There is no single method. The closest pedagogical tool I have found in working with students with difficulties is relationships, developing trust. It only happens in layers. The first layer is based on simple actions like a smile, an act of kindness or acknowledgement. The second is awareness, a commitment to critical listening and validation of what a person is saying or sharing. The third layer to me is the 'pear sharing', the moments when you reach out and support someone in such a way as to communicate that not only do you see what is happening, but that you understand and that it can be made better. The fourth is the continual contact, the ongoing relationship that is supported through daily actions and interactions. Some of these students have had so many different relationships go bad on them that their defense mechanisms have been built layer upon layer. It is essential that one create the opportunity to get close enough to know what their motivators are. Do they fit in your classroom community? Do the other kids accept them? Do other adults acknowledge them in a positive way? What is it that you appreciate about them? Do they know it?

As I indicated earlier, I believe the ability to learn is directly tied to trust.

Educators need to be aware of the fact that students who have been exposed to racism and oppression will struggle with the ability to trust. Being exposed to experiences that tell students they can take risks, challenge, and explore learning in an environment that is

respectful and reflective of their experiences is an essential aspect of an inclusive educational approach. Cooke-Dallin, Rosborough, and Underwood (2000) reinforce the importance of this when they maintain that “Valuing traditional knowledge by making it central to the education program is valuing students’ life experiences. Meaningful education must provide students with learning that fits the context of their lives” (p. 88).

Communicating with students the belief that they are capable of success and ensuring that you, as the educator, are there to help them achieve success is critical to developing a relationship built on trust. This communication has to happen through conversation, through connecting with students. Trust is developed through the words one shares, through ongoing conversations that work through the layers of distrust Métis youth often bring to the classroom.

Educator to Educator

My relationship with other educators also played an integral part in the work I did. I often found myself in situations where I was advocating for students, partially because I had reached a point in my life where I could recognize the need to speak up and try to deal with what I perceived were injustices. This occurred not only because students were beginning to trust me and were asking me to advocate for them, but also because it is part of the decolonization process.³⁴ Fitznor (2002) speaks to the notion of advocacy as a role Aboriginal educators take on. She shares that “the stories demonstrated how the participants were advocates of Aboriginal students who were marginalized and who faced

³⁴ Laenui articulates the processes of decolonization as having five distinct phases. These include (1) rediscovery and recovery; (2) mourning, (3) dreaming, (4) commitment, and (5) action. He tells us that each phase may be experienced all at once or at different times. More detail regarding the process and each of the stages is available in *Processes of Decolonization, from Reclaiming Indigenous Voice and Vision*.

acts of racism and bias in the curriculum” (p.98). This is also reflected through Sara’s³⁵ story (Fitznor, 2002, p. 146), where we see that “it was clear that Sara was advocating for students who were treated unfairly because of their difference.” As advocacy became a larger part of my role, I began to recognize those educators who were open to discussing and reviewing their own practices in terms of wanting to recognize their limitations and biases. However, being able to pursue these challenges required their trust as well.

Many of my colleagues enquired about specific activities I did to reach students. One of the areas I tried to reinforce was the building of positive relationships with both the students and their families. Often assumptions were made about the lack of family support before educators attempted to make home contact. While in the staffroom, the office, or picking up my mail at the ‘mailbox’, it was not uncommon for another educator to ask me if I had made contact with a student’s home. Generally this was asked because they were considering calling to speak with someone regarding the student and didn’t know if they should or not. Questions about whether I knew the family situation or what the student might be involved in (*read gangs, drugs, etc.*) generally preceded any attempt at home contact. Often, I was approached to ‘shed some light’ on the situation if after an initial attempt to contact home resulted in no answer. When this occurred I found myself reminding people that perhaps the reason they could not get an answer at home was not because there was no real support but rather because both parents were working. Let me emphasize here though that as often as I found myself in situations where educator ‘biases’ were evident, I also found myself very encouraged by the number of educators

³⁵ Fitznor captures the ‘stories’ of various Aboriginal Educators in her thesis entitled; *Aboriginal Educators’ Stories; Rekindling Aboriginal Worldviews. (Unpublished)* Although real names are not used, she refers to Sara as Sara O t’atchanookewin.

that were grappling with the concept of Aboriginal Education and trying to incorporate Aboriginal perspectives in their work.

There were many times that I was able to connect with other educators more casually, over coffee in the staff lounge, a quick conversation in the doorway of my classroom or theirs, and have brief discussions revolving around small successes and the strategies employed in the relationships I had with students that appeared to be working. I found through these experiences that teachers were often more willing to participate in these types of discussions if they were more casual. This mirrored the method I sometimes employed to 'push' students to rethink, analyze, and revisit a particular direction or decision they had made. In using this approach, I found I was not seen as a threat, as I was not perceived to be challenging their beliefs or their abilities, we were just talking. As is the case for people in general, it is often difficult for educators to recognize their biases. If we are to progress in this area, I believe it will have the most success if it is done in a non-confrontational accepting manner. Taking the approach of helping people understand what to do, not necessarily by telling them but rather through a process that allows them to recognize what is happening and how they might act on it with the appropriate processes and tools is an essential part in supporting educators. I often saw my role as a supportive role; one that was non-intrusive. This is in keeping with traditional Aboriginal behaviour. I am a firm believer in the fact that people have the right to make choices and that my role is, when people are ready, to support where I can. As I progress through Chapters Five, Six and Seven I discuss this in more detail.

To this day I love pears and when I think back on the important moments of my life that first pear by far is one of the most important ones. The very first time she handed me a piece of fruit I made a conscious decision to be a teacher. Her kind, caring,

supportive nature has always been a model for the kind of teacher I've wanted to be. The exclusion I felt as a person is something I have never wanted another child to feel, so I have put a lot of energy into helping educators and students be supportive and inclusive of each other and I continue to do so today.

CHAPTER FIVE

The Struggle with Identity – The Third Layer

When I first arrived at that school, I never thought twice about doing what I was doing as an educator. Initially, I came as a student teacher with a major in Marketing. It was very different time in my life. I was pregnant with my son, our first child, and my main focus was to make it to June 30th as my due date was the end of June. Of course I wanted to do a good job, my future as a teacher was riding on this, but the day to day reality was that I was tired and feeling as big as a house. I wanted to run the school store, teach Marketing and maybe a few Business Education courses, and live out the rest of my life in the bosom of my family. You know, the two kids, two cars, nice house, white picket fence, ever adoring-husband, and I can be a career woman too, kind of life. Acknowledging that I am an Aboriginal person or working with Aboriginal youth did not fit in to this scenario. My experience on staff as a student teacher went well, I did not even think about the fact that there were no Aboriginal students that I was aware of, to speak of at that time. I finished my student teaching and was told when a position opened up they would be calling. It helped that the current Marketing teacher was retiring in a couple of years, so I knew they would be looking for a replacement soon.

Three years later, and another child, I got the call. It was perfect timing, my daughter was almost a year old and they only wanted me half time, so I could still spend a lot of time with my young family and begin my career. The following year I went ³/₄ time and the year after that full-time. The year I went full-time, I took on the Marketing program and ran the school store. It was a very busy time but also the time when I began to notice some Aboriginal students in the building. In a school of 1100, teaching

Business courses meant that you met only a very small portion of the students, but running the store meant you saw most of the young people in the building. As I became more aware of the Aboriginal students, I wondered who they were and what they were taking. A few of them did end up taking my classes, but very few. Often I would find out that they were in the Work Education Program or the 04 Program, which was a remedial program for students who were deemed incapable of taking regular classes. I thought a lot about those kids over the next two years. Every semester it would be the same thing. The faces that would appear at the beginning of the semester would often be gone from the school within the next few weeks. I would still see them periodically, most often hanging around outside the school or out in the community but rarely in school as a regular student. I wondered about who they were, where they were from, what school was like for them and where they kept disappearing to.

At about this time, another teacher in the other building was signing up for a Native Awareness course in the evenings and asked if I was interested as well. I have always struggled with my identity and thought, why not? Maybe this will help me understand myself better. From the first class, it was an experience. I learned a lot about the culture and a bit about myself. In the fall of the following year, I watched once again, as Aboriginal students would appear and then disappear within a short time period. I thought, there must be something we can do to help them stay in school, so I approached my principal and asked if my teaching assignment for the second semester could be changed so I could offer a half credit in Native Studies. He thought it was a great idea and our Native Studies Program was born. What I came to understand from that first course was that I barely knew anything about the culture, the issues, or even who I was for that matter, and that I had better get busy learning. The students from that

first group were amazing. Most of them were 18 and had lived very difficult lives and as we walked together through that first course they taught me a multitude of things, not the least of which was how we define ourselves as individuals, how it affects our behaviors, and how that plays itself out on a daily basis.

The Labeling of a People

The issue of identity for Indigenous Peoples is very complex. There have been many names and labels attributed to the Indigenous Peoples of North America for a variety of reasons. Most of these have been ‘acquired’ through social, cultural, colonial, and legal/political processes. When I consider those that have been acquired through social processes, I am reminded of the practice of nicknaming and the ‘gifting’ of endearing names. My older sister was not referred to by her legal name until she was well into her adult years. When she was born she was the first grandchild on either side of my family. Both sides of my family were thrilled at her pending arrival, and when my uncle first laid eyes on her he described her as “*My lucky Penny*”. The name stuck and she has been Penny in our family ever since. In many Aboriginal communities there is also a process whereby someone’s actions result in another person naming them in a humorous way. There are many communities in Northern Manitoba where it is difficult to find an individual unless you identify them by their community name. Often, everyone in the community will know them as ‘Digger’ or some other name that they acquired as a result of their behaviour.³⁶

Many Aboriginal groups have incorporated, within their belief systems, an understanding of the importance of names for many different purposes. These names are

³⁶ Personal communication, Elder Martha Jonasson (February 4, 2004).

generally shared through a traditional ceremonial process which is often guided by an Elder or Traditional Teacher. They guide us through various ‘stages’ of our lives. It is not uncommon for someone to carry more than one of these names at a time.

The colonial process of naming occurred when Aboriginal people were ‘given’ English names. This occurred in residential schools, in the registering of people in communities, during adoption processes, and even by Aboriginal people themselves as they tried to find ways to fit into the dominate society.

The political and legal process of naming is also a colonial approach, but is done through the use of assimilative legislation and/or policy. *The Indian Act*, legislated in 1876, is perhaps the most widely known piece of legislation which clarified the misnomer label of Indian that was ‘applied’ to the Indigenous Peoples of the land now known as Canada. *The Indian Act* “determined who were ‘Indians’ in Canada” (Fitznor, 2004, p. 117) and stated that there were two categories of Indians, Status and non-Status. The Métis were not reflected in this legislation, as they were not considered to be Indian and therefore excluded. Generally, they were looked upon as ‘squatters’.

The historical practices of labeling people have created a great deal of confusion. This confusion is shared between both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people. When I first began my journey, I was completely unaware of these complexities. I bring them to this format in an attempt to raise a level of awareness that ‘things are not as they seem’. I will not go into any further detail³⁷ regarding this as it was not a consideration in my decolonization process until fairly recently. As I continue with the area of identity, in trying to respect the reader’s understanding of the process I have gone through, I will take

³⁷ This is an area that is currently being examined in various arenas. An in depth analysis of these complexities and their implications on identity will be available in the near future by Cree Scholar, Fitznor (2004), in her chapter on “The Power of Indigenous Knowledge: Navigating the Naming of Indigenous Groups and Identities Amidst the Legacy of European Colonial Definitions in Canada.” (*Unpublished*)

you to my first steps, and throughout the remainder of the chapter, guide you to where I find myself today.

Defining Identity

I am Métis. Only relatively recently, have I been able to say this with any confidence. I have known since I was very young that I had some Native blood in my family based solely on negative experiences. The first ones I remember began in elementary school where teasing and name-calling was common. The taunting began in grade one and became a daily occurrence by the end of grade two. The put-downs continued throughout my early and middle years schooling. Although I always denied that I was Native, I felt in my heart that it must be true. I knew this because my grandfather *'looked like an Indian and acted like one'*. I could see everything the kids teased me about, in him. Unfortunately, as I shared earlier, my paternal grandfather had succumbed to alcoholism and struggled with the disease on a daily basis. As I got older, these beliefs were further reinforced through classroom discussions, educational resources and teachers I encountered. All of these influences created the foundation on which I was building my self-identity as a Métis person; that is, until I began my own search approximately ten years ago.

My search began with needing to know definitively who my ancestors were and whether I was in fact 'Native', as I had been referred to many times in many different ways. This meant tracing my roots through genealogy to determine where our family originated from and what our history was. The desire to say 'I am . . .' with any confidence at all was tied up in knowing for sure my family history. For me, at that time, the 'proof' lay in being able to show this person was born here on this day to these

people. Being able to verify the original ethnic background of my ancestors was important in the process of understanding of who I was. I believe this is more common than is recognized as a starting point for many people of mixed-heritage; particularly for those who have been alienated from their family roots and histories. This notion is captured in “Métis Identity”³⁸ when authors Darren R. Préfontaine, Leah Dorion, Patrick Young and Sherry Farrell Racette (2002) discuss the area of Métis Genealogy. They state that:

The constant loss of community and racism that many Métis have experienced has resulted in a loss of family and community history. As the Métis struggle to reclaim their identity and rebuild their nation and communities, genealogy or the study of family history has been an area of intense activity (p. 31).

After much searching, I was able to trace both my paternal and maternal family roots. My father’s family (Laliberté/Ritchot) is French and Cree. The French is from Quebec and the Cree is from Manitoba. We go back six generations to the establishment of the Red River Settlement³⁹. Our family was the first Laliberté to settle in the Red River Settlement back in the late 1700’s. My mother’s family (Leveque/Olivier) is British, English and Native and they have also been here since the late 1700’s. I was born in St. Boniface; as were my mother, father and my grandparents on both sides, with the exception of my paternal grandfather who was born in St. Norbert. Our family, over many generations, has owned land and settled in various areas within the Red River Settlement (Sprague & Frye, 1983), including St. Vital, St. Norbert and St. Boniface. Shore and Barkwell (1997) also share with us aspects of Métis settlement through the following:

³⁸ Available at ‘Métis Museum’ <http://www.metismuseum.ca/media/document.php/00726.pdf>

³⁹ For a clearer understanding of the development and dispersal of the Red River Settlement, see D. Sprague & R. Frye, “*The Genealogy of the First Métis Nation*”, (1983).

When the amalgamation of the Hudson's Bay Company and the North West Company in 1821 caused a rash of unemployment, the affected individuals moved to the area around The Forks. Prior to this, the Métis had lived wherever they had found work in the fur trade or wherever they had wanted to live. What the move to the Red River provided was the opportunity to create a physical center for a rapidly evolving Métis homeland. In the river lot communities of St. Boniface, St. Vital and St. Norbert, the various classes of Métis congregated and prospered by farming, organizing buffalo hunts, and by commercial freighting (p.4).

My paternal ancestors worked for both the Northwest Company and the Hudson's Bay Company. They were also involved with farming and working casually as labourers. My maternal ancestors were very involved in the Catholic Church including many priests and nuns.

Originally, I believed that if I did the genealogy and traced my ancestors then I would be able to say "I am Métis" and no longer question it. What I discovered though was that my new found knowledge only raised more questions for me. Sure, now I could say I was a Métis person, but yet I still had these nagging questions about what that meant. By this time I had begun to attend various activities in the Aboriginal community. These included both social and cultural activities. Through this I was exposed to many First Nations' teachings. Some of these were in courses like the original Native Awareness course I took in 1994, others were through connecting with people who were attending ceremonies. They would often extend an invitation for me to join them. There I would learn about various First Nations' teachings, including, Cree, Ojibwa, Mohawk and many others that were not identified. The experiences and understandings I have gained as a result are invaluable to me as a person. At the same time, however, the teachings created confusion for me, as I continually questioned whether they were a part of 'Métis culture' or not. What I now realize through my reconnection to the culture and teachings is that I had indeed been assimilated. Prior to these experiences, if I made any

references to Aboriginal people being assimilated, I did not make the connection to myself. It was through acquiring the knowledge regarding history and sitting with other Aboriginal people learning about traditional teachings and culture that I was finally able to come to this realization. This new understanding sent me down the path of rebuilding my knowledge base as a Métis person. It meant reconnecting with Métis history, culture and people in order to learn about what it meant to be Métis.

The Métis: A Historical Context

Métis author, Howard Adams (1995), in his book *A Tortured People: the Politics of Colonization*, discusses the emergence of the Métis population. He denotes that:

The historical emergence of the Métis population development differed from Indians, which has never been fully explored and clarified. There is more than a single source or their origin. The French Métis are one subgroup of the mixed-bloods who, including the English halfbreed, once composed two distinct societies. These societies were unique, inter-racial mixtures of Indians and Europeans that could trace their beginnings to the fur trade (p.102).

Once the Europeans began to settle on the North American continent, it was only inevitable that over time they would intermarry and have children with the Indigenous Peoples. Early marriages resulted in many groups of people who are of mixed ancestry, although it is important to note that the development of the distinct Métis were not primarily based on intermarriage, but one of growing cultural uniqueness and group self-consciousness. During the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, in the area known as Rupert's Land, the Métis began to evolve as a 'new people'. It was during the early years of the fur trade that this distinct group of people was established, as Métis author Shore (1991) shares with us:

The exact date by which the Métis were recognized as such by others is unknown. What is known is that by the mid-eighteenth century certain

people around the forks of the Red and Assiniboine Rivers were referring to themselves as either “Bois-Brûlés” or Métis” (p.1).

The experiences of the Métis are both similar and different than that of the First Nations people. Our histories are intertwined, our values and beliefs are similar, and our languages and cultural practices have been handed down from our shared ancestors. However, inherent to the Métis, are also those histories, values, beliefs, cultural practices and languages of their European ancestors. The diverse groups of Métis peoples have a variety of languages, cultures and spiritual beliefs. Some Métis identify themselves more with their First Nations ancestors. Cited in the book, “Past Reflects the Present: The Métis Elders’ Conference”, authored by Shore and Barkwell (1997), a Métis Elder, Laura Guiboche speaks to the issue of identification at the Métis Elders Conference held in Winnipeg in 1991. She maintains:

A lot of people will say that something is Indian and that we’re not Métis if we do things that way. First and foremost, there wouldn’t have been any Métis if there hadn’t been any Indians. The Métis have carried on Aboriginal traditions because they’re things that have been passed down generation to generation by the Métis (p. 93).

Still others identify more with their non-Aboriginal ancestors. Robert Chartrand (Shore & Barkwell, 1997), one of the conference organizers, shared his thoughts at that same conference during a discussion on Métis ceremonies:

The further north you go, the more Aboriginal things are, not like the southern Métis, the “traditional” or “historical” Métis. Louis Riel wanted the Catholic Church and the Catholic Religion taught to Métis students and he got that put into the Manitoba Act (p. 92).

Here in Manitoba, the Métis who identify with their First Nations and French ancestors are seen as the Métis of Rupert’s Land and recognize themselves to be distinct to this geographical region. They developed a ‘strong group cohesiveness’ (Barkwell,

2002) and have often been referred to as the *Métis*.⁴⁰ As Shore (2001) indicates, “We [also] know that during these years the Métis initiated and practiced the cultural mechanisms by which they managed their communities” (p.71). These practices were and are a blend of both First Nations and French practices which have been handed down from generation to generation.

With a strong political will and ties to the rebellion movement of the West, the Métis have historically been recognized as a distinct group within the broader classification of Aboriginal people within Canada. Although I make reference to Canada, it is understood that the Indigenous people of this land considered the North American continent as Turtle Island and did not necessarily concern themselves with the borders established by the Europeans. Their migratory patterns included movements into the areas now known as the United States and they would commonly be found in areas throughout North Dakota and Montana.

As defined by the *Constitution Act* of 1982, Aboriginal people in Canada are recognized as First Nations, Métis and Inuit. First Nations are considered those people associated with Treaties, Inuit people are the Indigenous people of the North, and the Métis are those people having a mixed heritage of both First Nations and European ancestors. It is important to recognize that this is a somewhat simplistic explanation for a situation that has been created through the development of paternalistic legislation and policy designed to assimilate the original inhabitants of North America. Fitznor (2004) speaks to the complexities of the naming and colonial definitions in “*The Power of*

⁴⁰ Pronounce *Métisse* as captured in Métis Legacy.

*Indigenous Knowledge: Navigating the Naming of Indigenous Groups and Identities amidst the Legacy of European Colonial Definitions in Canada.*⁴¹

Initially, when I began my search by doing my genealogy, I was thinking that I would be considered Métis based on my 'bloodline'. This was because I have often heard people refer to themselves as ½ Indian, ¾ Native or other such mixtures. I was not at a point in my understanding to recognize that 'blood is blood', there is no such thing as Indian blood, Native blood, European blood or any other type of blood. Blood is blood. Today, I understand that considering oneself Métis is not about the ethnic origin of one's blood. It is about being exposed to and understanding both Indigenous and European knowledge and incorporating the gifts from both worlds. It is about being comfortable with who you are, having the opportunities to know about your ancestors and their beliefs and life experiences, and being capable of making conscious decisions about which teachings one chooses to incorporate in one's life. I believe being of mixed ancestry should be seen as a blessing, because one is given the opportunity to embrace the goodness in both worlds rather than being ashamed of either one.

On Being Métis: A Cultural Expression

Certainly, to be Métis means that one is of mixed descent, but it also reflects a diversity of experiences. Although the Rupert's Land Métis have shared relatively common experiences, as Préfontaine, et al (2002) articulate "In the case of the historic Red River Métis, they were allowed to develop and foster a common cultural identity, which many, if not the majority, of today's Métis identify as their own" (p.10). It is

⁴¹ Currently unpublished.

understood that for the most part, the experiences of the Métis have been very diverse. Historically, the Métis have always worked towards improving their economic, social and political standing. The ability to be generous, adaptive, visionary, philosophical, hospitable, and most importantly, people who lived their beliefs, were gifts they received from their Indian heritage.

In my desire to understand what the Métis culture was, I did what I have always done when I set about learning something; I read. I looked for material from wherever I could find it, always questioning, who is the author, does he/she identify themselves as Aboriginal or Métis? I also began attending activities that were organized by Métis people. Initially, I found these by connecting with the Manitoba Métis Federation⁴². As I participated in various events I kept asking what aspects of this activity makes it Métis? I certainly recognized the jigging and fiddling as being Métis and I also knew that the Red River Cart, the Métis Flag and the Sash meant Métis, but beyond that I just didn't know. I couldn't seem to answer the question, "what makes this activity a Métis activity"? One day, while sitting in a room full of people laughing, talking and enjoying food, it suddenly hit me: I had been looking for 'things' I could identify as 'Métis' and entirely missed the people. I had been doing my 'research' without speaking to people, without speaking to my elders about life and life experiences. As I began to do this, I discovered that those things that I had been taught, that I had experienced growing up, were indeed a part of the Métis culture. The knowledge I held, the values that have directed my life on a day-to-day basis, are the shared values of my people.

⁴² The political organization that is recognized in Manitoba as the voice of the Métis population who are registered as its' members.

If I were to describe this 'culture' I would say that traditionally the Métis have lived a lifestyle that was in harmony with nature. That along with hunting, trapping and fishing, many Métis were aware of the traditional medicines and various plants that ensured families were well fed and nurtured. I remember the delicious soups and stews that often simmered on our stove and that of my grandfathers. One never knew if it was rabbit stew or some other meat, but there was never any doubt that it would be delicious. Food was, and is always, a part of our gatherings. Whether it was at our house or at a larger gathering, there was always lots of food and laughter. Music and dancing were also staples at any gathering. I can't say that I remember any of my family fiddling or jigging, but boy could they dance. Gatherings at our house always went on to the early hours of the morning. Often times, long after we were supposed to be asleep, my brothers and sisters and I would sit at the top of the stairs and listen to the stories and the laughter.

Métis culture also includes a unique form of Spirituality. When you listen to some of the elders they speak of being Catholic, believing in God and at the same time, they will make references to, or participate in, ceremonies that are clearly Cree or Ojibwe. There is a blending of Métis spiritual beliefs with Catholic or other European-based religious beliefs and activities. Oral traditions, traditional knowledge, and the sharing of our histories and our lives through stories have been a large part of my experience as a Métis person. Hearing the stories at various gatherings, listening to the Elders speak of their experiences, sharing their thoughts and laughter has been a wonderful gift. I have now begun to sit with my father and listen to his stories. When he speaks of my grandfather's love and commitment to my grandmother, even through all the difficulties they encountered, I am reminded of the depth of feeling I have been gifted

with. One that I have always been cognisant of, but never really connected to the teachings I received from my father.

As a people, we incorporate a variety of teachings and knowledge. These are woven together in our lives and behaviours. This weaving of knowledge only makes us stronger. As the infinity symbol represents, we are the coming together of two distinct and vibrant cultures, to produce a distinctly new culture, the Métis. Our roots are in both societies and thus our knowledge base and teachings reflect both. It is important to note though that as a people we will continue to evolve. As Préfontaine et al. (2002) remind us:

People, as individuals and as groups are never static: individuals evolve and devolve and society is always in a constant state of flux. Métis identity is flexible, and can readily adapt to a variety of situations, because it is a mental rather than a physical or environmental construct. The fact is that the Métis developed their sense of nationhood not because of European and Euro-Canadian civilization or the North West Company or even Louis Riel. Rather, it was the natural expression of their own reality in the context of their own social development (p.15).

As a Métis person, this is a message I have worked hard at sharing over the past ten years, whether it has been as a parent, friend, daughter, sibling, classroom teacher, educator, consultant, mentor, or any other role I have taken on.

The Struggle with Racism

Being a Métis person, I have struggled throughout my life with racism and the effects of it on my own identity. I grew up in an area where our family was one of the few Aboriginal families, and as a result I was unaware of any other Métis families. Even as a student in university, I was not aware of any other Métis students. There were a few

First Nations families in our neighbourhood, but we did not have any direct relationship with them. In my family, our heritage was never discussed and as a result, I had nothing to balance the negative messages I received; messages from the educational system, the media, and society as a whole. Although what I heard 'felt' wrong, I didn't have the knowledge to recognize it, understand it for what it was, or even consider discounting or arguing against it.

Racism has been a common experience in my life, as is the case with many Aboriginal people. Over time, I have found myself in situations where the racism I encountered has been from a First Nations person rather than a non-Aboriginal person. This reality of not feeling accepted by non-Aboriginal and First Nations people was articulated during the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (1996) process.

Although most Métis people are or have been involved in both the Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal worlds, many have never felt fully accepted by either world. That is why their forbearers established separate Métis settlements" (Vol. 4, Chap. 5).

The effects of this type of experience has been a part of my struggle with identity, particularly when I was trying to come to terms with understanding whether I was Aboriginal, Métis, or Native, and what all those terms actually meant. When I reference the fact that I was not accepted in 'either world', it is in recognition of these experiences. This is a part of the reality of Métis history and what the oppression of Métis people has entailed. This continues to be a part of the experiences of the Métis today and cannot be ignored as we move forward.

In his poem, "Divided",⁴³ Métis author Gregory Scofield (1996, p. 45) captures the essence of how I felt time and time again, trying to negotiate that 'place' between

⁴³ Divided can be found in it's entirety in his book, "The Gathering: Stones for the Medicine Wheel".

both worlds. I have chosen to reference those aspects of his poem that specifically touch on the tension I have struggled with by sharing the following lines:

My beige-pink shade
Unlike you with bronze skin
I'm a Skin without colour; I get the brushoff
Ego-tripping on me again
Deciding if I am pure enough Red enough

Growing up in an all-white town
I never forgot my red half It counted big
Especially if you looked not right white
But wrong white To white people that's off-white
Dirty white in Sally Ann clothes

Supporting the Development of Identity

Ultimately, the decision to be inclusive of Aboriginal perspectives and the inclusion of Métis resources specifically lies with the classroom teacher. When teachers review their curriculum, plan their lessons, determine what they will focus on within a particular lesson, and select their materials and resources, they make decisions about how inclusive their course will be. It is through this process that the decision to be reflective of a Métis way of life or not is present. By paying attention to the diversity of Aboriginal people, one can ensure that various perspectives are incorporated, including a diverse Métis perspective. The importance of ensuring that the distinctiveness of the Métis culture is a part of the educational process was articulated in the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples report (1996):

Métis children, who belong to a 'minority within a minority', find their formal education even more culturally arid than First Nations children. The little information about Aboriginal people they encounter in public schools is likely to have more to do with First Nations or Inuit cultures than their own. When material about Aboriginal people is developed for inclusion in school curricula, Métis educational authorities and Elders should be consulted to ensure that the distinctiveness of Métis culture is not overlooked (Vol. 4, Chap. 5).

The consideration of this by a classroom teacher, I believe, is affected by their exposure to the concept of being inclusive of Aboriginal perspectives, their understanding of the diversity of the Aboriginal community, and the clarification of how to incorporate Aboriginal perspectives.

As I indicated earlier, many current educators have had little exposure to the area of Aboriginal Education through their formal education processes, let alone have acquired deeper understanding of Métis specific history, culture, and perspectives. The Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples report (1996) captures this when they reference the fact that:

The state of knowledge about Métis history also requires attention. Every culture draws its nourishment from the past, and no medium of communication, popular or scholarly, can be expected to explain a culture if its history is not accurately known. Our earlier observation that one end of the educational bridge must be firmly anchored in the past is as true for informal sources of learning as it is for formal instruction (Vol. 4, Chap. 5).

The concept of incorporating Aboriginal perspectives⁴⁴ in the classroom has not been a requirement of current Teacher Education Programs in the Province of Manitoba. The Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (1996) clearly called for compulsory courses to support the process of including Aboriginal perspectives. Additionally, a recent study on Aboriginal Education done by Silver and Mallet (2002), entitled “Aboriginal Education in Winnipeg Inner City High Schools”, identified the need for Aboriginal teachers and emphasized the area of teacher training. This is not to say that there has been no efforts in this area, as there has been more in recent years, but often these discussions are somewhat limited or captured within an optional course. As a

⁴⁴ I am using the phrase Aboriginal perspectives as it is what is currently used within discussions related to diversity and addressing the needs of Aboriginal students. Please be encouraged to substitute the word Métis, where applicable.

result, exposure to incorporating Aboriginal perspectives can be somewhat of a hit or miss experience. Many of today's educators were also not exposed to Aboriginal perspectives during their secondary school experiences, so their approach to understanding the importance of including Aboriginal perspectives tends to come from a level of ignorance within their own life experiences. Given this understanding, I believe there is a need and responsibility for school administration and divisional leadership to communicate the importance and expectation to all staff that diverse Aboriginal perspectives will be a part of the educational culture throughout the school division. It is essential that along with this message, there is appropriate planning and the dedication of resources to support educators within the classroom. The resources required would include, but not be restricted to, appropriate professional development opportunities, acquiring Aboriginal resources that reflect the diverse nature of the population, ensuring staffing is diverse and includes Aboriginal educators at all levels, and creating a school climate that is welcoming to, and respectful of, Aboriginal parents and the community as a whole.

The School Division, the Superintendents' Office, and the Board Trustees, also have responsibilities in the area of Aboriginal Education. These include policy development, budgetary resources, the development of, and support for, professional development opportunities, awareness and communication of the importance of creating inclusive environments, supporting both the acquisition and development of appropriate classroom resources and activities, and sharing information and creating dialogue with the Aboriginal community to ensure the division is responsive to the communities needs.

As I close this chapter I leave you with more of Scofield's (1996, p. 82) words, words borrowed from the poem "Answer For My Brother". Through this poem, he

brings alive the issues of racism from non-Aboriginal and First Nations people, the lack of articulation of Métis history, pan-Indianism, and the limitations in the current identification of Métis leaders. Through the choice of particular stanzas, I have highlighted some of the racial tensions he shares:

Who Are The Métis?

His question a clever way to get me thinking where is my place but I detect something else because he's an Indian having been through the wringer only he came out with a strong sense of self going to back to the sacred teachings

Brief mention of our leaders who were a thorn in the government's ass they made it to the N section in the encyclopedia under the "North West Rebellion" which more or less infers we needed to be put into our proper place

If anything, we are Katipamsoochick⁴⁵.

⁴⁵ The people who own themselves. This Cree word has been spelled in its' anglicized form. The poem, in its entirety can be found in his book, "The Gathering: Stones for the Medicine Wheel".

CHAPTER SIX

Finding 'Voice' – The Fourth Layer

How many times had I tried to avoid questions, intentionally not offered answers or chose not to contribute to the discussion, wanting to be invisible? I had little faith in my knowledge or that my thoughts on a particular topic would be of value to anyone else. There were so many moments when my skin would prickle with fear, fear that I would open my mouth, speak and people would know that I didn't know anything about the topic, or that my degree wasn't really earned. These types of feelings and thoughts were not only a part of my experiences throughout the years I spent within the public school system, but they also remained with me as both an educator and a post-secondary student.

How was I going to help my students empower themselves when I could, so easily, slip back into silence. Why did I keep pushing, trying to get others to understand, when I found it so exhausting some days? Even though there were many times these thoughts ran through my head, there were also many more experiences with the students that were so rewarding that I just knew, I would not, could not give up.

Reclaiming Voice

I was the only Aboriginal teacher in the school division I worked in for over 13 years. During the last five or six years, while I was in a process of learning about who I was, I suddenly found myself defending and advocating for Aboriginal students on a regular basis. I was never one to be the centre of attention, nor was I comfortable 'taking

people on' no matter what the scenario. The situations I was finding myself in as an educator, beyond the regular classroom expectations, became very difficult for me given my own personal development. Despite this, I knew that no matter how uncomfortable I was, I could not just walk away and leave things as they were.

Quite often, I was put in the position of attempting to explain, justify, advocate for, and defend 'Aboriginal Education'. Although intuitively, I felt that it was necessary to incorporate Aboriginal perspectives into what we were doing in the school division and in our schools, I was struggling with my own understanding of what was meant by Aboriginal Education, without having any confidence in my own knowledge. Once again, I could feel those 'prickles' all over my skin. It was difficult to speak what was in my heart, to articulate what I knew and felt to be true. It seemed like every time I got into a conversation about this, I just ended up frustrated and, once again found myself slipping into silence.

Student Voice: "Expressed Through the Eagle Feather"

What is student voice? Interesting question. One that an educator should be able to answer easily, or so one would think. Yet many educators at a conference I attended, "Exploring Student Voice", (March, 1997) had a great deal of difficulty explaining it. In fact most of them came to 'find out' what it was. Those with an understanding varied so much in their definition that we, in our group session, could not agree on a common definition. This seemed like such a simple question requiring little consideration. Why then did I find it so difficult to explain at times? Perhaps what threw me was, that, given

the word 'voice', I expected the explanation to focus on the oral, when in fact, I have come to believe that only a small part of student voice is expressed orally.

Working in a multi-ethnic secondary school with over 1100 teenagers gave me the opportunity to hear a lot of youth expressing their 'voices' to the fullest of their capabilities. When you, as the teacher, delve into a math problem, or a play, that they feel is not the least bit interesting, you'll quickly hear what their collective voices have to say;

"This is boring!"

"Why do we have to do this?"

"What a waste of time!"

"Can't we do something interesting today?"

From this perspective, I would say that student voice is not an issue. One can hear what they are saying loud and clear and react to it in an effective manner. My focus, in regard to student voice, was and is more about the silent voices screaming throughout our education system.

The definition of student voice that I was most comfortable with, at this point in time, was one shared by the conference keynote speaker, Dr. Judith Newman. In her speech (Newman, 1997), she explained her understanding of student voice as "anything that signals an opportunity to create a different learning environment." This opportunity can occur anytime, anywhere. It may present itself in the classroom, in the middle of the crowded hallway, on the way into the staff room, out in the parking lot, in the stands at a school basketball game, anywhere that one may come in contact with students.

For me, as an Aboriginal teacher, this opportunity appeared many times in the form of an Eagle Feather. The Eagle Feather is held sacred to most Native North American Peoples. The Eagle flies higher and sees further than any other bird. He/She has the ability to move between both the spirit world and the earth world. He/She was

given the honour of carrying our prayers between both worlds where our Creator and the Grandfathers reside. When one holds an Eagle Feather, one must speak with truth in a positive way. The Eagle Feather is the highest honour one may bestow upon another, and is therefore treated with utmost respect. We honor the Feather of the Eagle, with great care, showing it respect, honesty, and truth at all times.

The Eagle Feather I carry was gifted to me by an Elder whose words are as clear to me today as they were the day he said them; *“use this Feather to guide you as you and the young ones continue to learn.”* Guide it has. Almost immediately it opened my door to students who have an understanding of the sacredness of the Feather. Many of these students approached and began conversations with me directly as a result of my having the Eagle Feather either on my desk, or in my hand. That Eagle Feather signaled an opportunity to make a connection. Those students who approached me, merely by their actions, gave me a small window of opportunity, an indication of who they were and where they may be coming from.

I remember one student in particular who had come to the school from a reserve, just outside the city, to finish his high school courses. The reserve he came from only went up to grade nine. Initially, he was not a student of mine, but on one particular morning, as I was working in my office, he was passing by my open door. Suddenly he stopped, saw the Eagle Feather on the desk, and walked in. Without saying a word, he picked up the Feather, handling it very gently and respectfully. Watching him hold it in such a careful way, I could tell that he had held one before and that he understood its sacredness. After a short silence, he asked how I came to have an Eagle Feather at school. I proceeded to explain where I got it and how I use it in the Native Studies course. At this point in our conversation his eyes lit up. He had not known there was a course like that in

the school. I offered to look at his schedule and see if he might be able to transfer in. Fortunately, it worked and he was able to join our class.

He was a wonderful addition to our group. His wealth of knowledge of the culture, which he had been eager to share, was a true gift to our circle. He had a tremendous sense of humour and a quiet strength that many in our group, including myself, depended on. He was animated and lively in our discussions and always quiet, serious, and thoughtful in our circles. The example he set for the others was one of confidence, understanding, and inner strength.

This student is but one example of many where Aboriginal students 'found' me and ended up transferring into the various courses I taught. One of the methodologies I used on a regular basis, no matter what subject area I was teaching, was the circle. It was through these circles, that many concerns were expressed by my students in terms of their overall experiences within the school. Some of the experiences shared were 'good' ones, but often they reflected incidences that resulted in frustration and anger, as well as feelings of futility and hopelessness. Listening to them 'voice' these feelings, I knew in my heart I could not just sit by, and so slowly, over time, I began to advocate for them whenever the opportunity arose. Initially, I would touch base with a teacher in an informal way, and sometimes that was enough to resolve the situation. Other times it required a more formal follow up, which might include parents, family, guidance counselors, and/or administration. One of the things I found surprising was the number of students who were very vocal in our class, and yet not responsive or involved in other classes. I found this particularly surprising when I knew the teacher to have had an overall reputation with the students as being 'a good teacher'. Periodically, the opportunity to discuss this in our circles would arise and when it did, I would try to elicit

from my students what they saw as the reasons why this occurred. The responses from them were generally along similar lines and often sounded something like the following:

"Sometimes other people make me feel uncomfortable."

"In our classes we can say anything and it doesn't matter".

"We talk about real things, not stuff from books that I haven't read and I probably won't ever read."

"The kids in our class kind of learn from me so they need me to talk. In other classes we learn from the book or the teacher so it doesn't really matter if we don't say anything".

"I came to the city, cause our school doesn't teach us a lot once we get older and I know we need a good education."

For many of my students, their decision to be a part of a class or not, didn't appear to be rooted in fear of ignorance. More often than not, it appeared to be in the **value** placed on their contributions in terms of need and the connection the material had to their lives. It was interesting to discuss with them how they felt about other students needing them and their knowledge in our class. We also talked about how much I valued their contributions. As I was reviewing and reflecting on the various discussions we had I noted a journal entry that perhaps sums this up best.

Nov 22, 1997

Today was a particularly intense circle. Once again, we are struggling with the fact that some of the students have not been attending their other classes regularly or completing their work. These same students never miss a class here and usually complete the assignments. I find this very frustrating and I told them so today. I expected them to get annoyed, which some of them did, but what I didn't expect was the insight and honesty that came out of that circle, although I guess I shouldn't be surprised anymore. These were the words that reminded me so quickly about why I do this work, no matter how hard it sometimes feels: "Ya know Mrs. Dyck, sometimes this class is really hard to take, but I really like it and I would never skip it. Sometimes I think you worry too much about us but then I really like it when your forehead gets all wrinkled up and I know your thinking about one of us. Those are the days when I try to concentrate really hard on what we're doing so that I can help you out. Maybe you try too hard though. There is an elder on my reserve who told me that we can guide and support people but can't always 'do' for others, sometimes we have to let them make the mistakes and be there after to pick them up and help them go on. I guess that's what teaching is all about."

What I came to understand from this is that Aboriginal youth need to be heard and to feel that what they have is of value. We, as educators, need to listen to what they have to say about their experiences and their dreams. We need to recognize, help, foster, and develop their abilities. Before we can do this, we need to understand what is and is not happening for them within our institution.

Is this student voice? I believe it is, but it is also about being connected and a sense of belonging. It's about valuing all students and their life experiences. The students who were connecting with me through the Eagle Feather were letting us know that they need that understanding. They needed to feel connected, to feel like they belong, that their experiences can and do, contribute to the educational process. Student voice takes on many different shapes and forms that are not necessarily easily recognized, especially when the individual is not from the dominant culture within our society. It is imperative that we watch and listen closely to catch that 'window of opportunity' that will enable us to engage them in a way that is meaningful to them. Curwen Doige (2001) maintains that:

It is not enough to hear the Aboriginal voice and to acknowledge the Aboriginal presence; Aboriginal people must be valued as an integral, important part of their own education. Also, who Aboriginal people are as human beings must be valued and treasured. Therein lies the essence of spirituality, in other words, valuing the nonmaterial aspect of humanness (p.127).

Understanding the Fragility of Voice

As I walked this journey in pursuit of my degree, there were many times I struggled to feel confident in my ability to express and clearly articulate what I believed to be true. Although I had continually talked about and tried to reinforce in my students

the need for them to develop and use their voices, I found myself periodically struggling with my own voice, particularly as a graduate student.

This struggle really came to the forefront near the end of my course work when I handed in a paper which I had invested a lot of myself in. I was very pleased with the outcome and felt a certain level of comfort about the degree of exposure contained within the paper. I had had some good conversations with the professor of the course and felt there was a certain amount of understanding in our relationship about the risks I was taking. To some extent, I do still believe this to be true, however upon receiving the paper back after submitting it for evaluation; I was reminded as to how easily one's voice can be shut down. Of course, this was not something that I recognized at the time but rather it took a fair period of time, some distancing of myself from the situation, and many discussions with other Aboriginal educators on how I felt, before I reached the point where I clearly understood the effect that professors remarks had had on me.

I can still see the question on the paper so clearly, "*How do we know if this is true?*" A simple statement, an appropriate question in terms of understanding the importance of how data is collected, analyzed, and reflected in the position one takes. It was, however, a question that captured my greatest fear. That my knowledge, my understanding, my interpretation of my own life experiences and their effects on myself as an individual, were completely wrong and invalid. That the messages I heard from the students in my life were irrelevant, no matter what I told them. That the risks they took in sharing their voices, that the faith and trust they placed in me, was misplaced.

My first reaction to the comments on the page was anger. After all I had struggled through to share what I had chosen to share, after the risks I had taken, to be challenged on the validity of the data and my position seemed to be more than I could

bear. As the anger and frustration began to build, so did the fear that the underlying accusation I felt was indeed true. What did I know? Who did I think I was to make the statements I had made about racism, connections, about the effects the education system has on Aboriginal people. Those thoughts that I believed I was finally conquering began to resurface. *You're just a stupid Indian, you don't know anything! What makes you think anybody wants to hear anything you have to say? Why would you think that what you have to say actually means something? Why don't you just be quiet and be grateful you got as far as you did before anyone realized just how stupid you really are!* I did the only thing I could at the time, I 'thanked god' I didn't fail the paper and therefore the course, I swallowed how I felt, and I stopped writing. I stopped trying to develop the thoughts I had around Aboriginal and, in particular, Métis education. I did not take pen to paper again for more than six months. During that time, when people asked how my work was going I would simply respond with "*not well, I am very busy with work and home and I just don't have time to write.*" There were many times that I contemplated stopping. I was no longer in a position to consider switching to a comprehensive theme because any further course work required me writing papers and articulating my thoughts. I just couldn't go there again.

Whenever I did think about trying to start again, I couldn't seem to get past those words. I kept seeing them no matter how hard I tried not to. I often picked up the paper and read and reread the words, trying to find a different meaning in them. Eventually, I mentioned the experience to a couple of people I was close to. They would try to encourage me to move beyond them, but I still felt completely tongue tied. Finally, one day I sat reflecting on the many different students I had had over the years and how they all had influenced my life in some way. I was recalling how much some of them had

grown over the years and how lucky I was to have spent time with them. Something made me shift to my Wolf Vision and how lonely I sometimes felt. The realization that those students had affected me in many ways, including through the development of an Aboriginal community within the school, slowly spread over me. Some of them were still very involved in the school and their families were also somewhat active. As I thought about this I realized that not only was I not alone, but what I had to say was important; that I had a responsibility to share my thoughts in a wider arena. For whatever reason, I was compelled, once again, to pull out that paper and read over those words. When I finished, I sat down and began to journal, to respond to what I felt at the time was an accusation on the truth of my words and my beliefs. That response is what follows:

Sept 2000

This data is data that has come from my heart and spilled onto the page. It is not numbers being calculated, re-jigged. It is full of laughter and tears. It was collected through hugs, the holding of hands, the slight nods of understanding and the smiles of encouragement. The contacting of eyes with years of painful understanding exchanged in mere moments. The sacredness of the circle, the opening of hearts, the smudging of medicines, the strength of the eagle feather, the bond of trust, the realization and sadness of shared experiences.

How do we know if this is true? I'm not challenging your honesty or beliefs but . . . I beg to differ. In your question you are asking, "Is your sacred circle really valid? Does the pain you experienced listening to the words, seeing the emotions and holding this young woman validate this truth? Did the tears she shed, the respect she had in the eagle feather mean anyone else should believe in her words?" Doesn't your question reflect the position that research is only valid if the methodology is consistent with the 'standard', 'accepted' practices?

As I reflect on this experience it is a reminder to me and others that the process of developing voice and confidence in the validity of what one has to share is a long, complex, internal process, which can be fraught with many pitfalls. The structures of our educational systems are colonial based, as I indicated earlier. This includes the post-secondary system as Hampton (2000) indicates "Most, but not all, university education in

Canada today is education for assimilation. Universities typically operate on the assumption that Eurocentric content, structure, and process constitute the only legitimate approach to knowledge (p. 210). I needed to reflect on and come to the realization that my work and the work of other Aboriginal scholars, would be challenged many times within the system. I began to realize just how important through the words of Castellano, Davis & Lahache (2000) when, in their efforts to analyze some obstacles to education, they maintained that:

Aboriginal people are now asserting that the pursuit of higher education should not mean a forced choice between Aboriginal identity and educational attainment. In contemporary post-secondary education, the challenge is to negotiate the conditions within which Aboriginal values, culture, and identity can thrive (p. 171).

As educators, we have a responsibility to not only develop and nurture the many voices in our classrooms but also ensure that in the process we continue to encourage and validate them over time. As efforts are made individually and collectively to negate the effects of racism and stereotyping on the articulation of voice, we need to recognize that there will be many experiences that individuals encounter that will adversely affect individual progress. These experiences need to be balanced out with those that are encouraging and supportive to ensure that over time, the educational community is seen as one that is open and responsive to all.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Understanding Community and Relationships –

The Strength of the Circle

As I rounded the curve on the highway, it was as if the world stood still. Off in the distance was a mountain in the form of a buffalo. He was neither lying down, nor standing: but rather somewhere in between. I remember thinking that it had to be alive, that the buffalo was in that exact moment of movement when all of one's muscles are collected, tensed up, pulled together, poised, and ready to stand. All of the strength and power in that majestic animal is captured in that second just before fluidity of movement, a movement that would be full of grace, breathtaking in its swiftness, strength, and beauty. Suddenly, I thought of the young people I had worked with and the many Aboriginal people I knew who were working so hard to make a difference. I reflected on the Aboriginal scholars who were writing, speaking out, sharing their thoughts and ideas and the Elders who were sharing their knowledge and wisdom. It was then that I realized we were that mountain. We were and are gathering our strength in many ways. Our Elders are awakening, our ceremonies are being practiced, our traditional teachings are coming back to the communities, our scholars are reclaiming our Indigenous philosophies and methodologies, our young people are showing their pride in who they are, our artists and musicians are sharing their creativity and celebrating their heritage, our languages are being spoken. All of this is happening within the many nations of our people.

I had never seen or heard of this mountain before. Later that day I learned that it is called "Sleeping Buffalo Mountain". It is located just outside of Banff, Alberta and I

saw it while on my way to an Aboriginal Education Symposium (Feb. 2001) being held at the Aboriginal Management Centre in Banff Alberta. After I arrived at the management centre and settled in my room, I decided I had to go out and offer tobacco for the experience/gift Creator had just shared with me. As I stepped outside of my room I realized that I was at the foot of a mountain, so I walked up a ways through the trees and found a place to offer my thanks. It wasn't until later when I shared this experience with the group I was to spend the next ten days with, that I learned the name of the mountain and the fact that my lodgings were at the base of that same mountain.

Searching for 'Community'

I have thought a lot about my classroom environment before, the way that I teach, the decisions I make, a multitude of things that I believe have an effect on my students and myself, but I have not really considered these things as notions of "community" before.

Recently, I shared the following as a definition of community, "*community is the bringing together of people around common issues or beliefs whereby the environment is conducive to sharing with consideration of diversity and respect*". Articulated well, I felt a small sense of pride in my definition. There was a reason I used these words. Up until that point, I did not know I even owned them. What I didn't realize at the time was that the notion of community is very complicated for me.

My own personal history is such that I have not experienced a sense of community very often in my life. Being a Métis person, I have always felt like someone on the outside looking in when it comes to belonging to a cultural community. I never felt accepted as either Native or White. I can remember wanting to be seen as white and

trying so hard to look the part. I used to feel so angry when someone would suggest that I was Native. When York (1990) relates the story of a child's experience in his first foster home and how he reacted to his 'nativeness' by "taking soap and a brush and trying to rub the brown colour off his skin"(p. 226), I can well remember being in that same place.

There were very few people whom I socialized with during my high school years and often they were people who also did not fit in. Most of them did not finish high school, but whatever my motivation, it was strong enough that I did. I spent most of my schooling silent. I had long since learned that this was my best bet because generally, I felt like whenever I would volunteer an answer it was either incorrect or I was ignored. I worked hard at school, seeing it as a way to escape the 'inner-city' life I saw around me. Unfortunately, I had learned how to play the game. Remain silent, don't challenge, and never draw attention to myself. Perhaps then no one would notice that I was 'native' and still there. It cost me a great deal to play that game, a cost that I have only barely begun to see and understand. Young (1997) expressed what I am just beginning to grasp, when she spoke of her understanding of her experiences as a result of being excluded by the education system. "I went through high school feeling isolated, alienated from myself, my people and family, but most of all, I alienated myself from myself" (p.12).

When I moved on to the University, I could not find a community I might 'fit in' with either. Perhaps I had already determined that for me that was impossible. I never saw any other Aboriginal people there. More than likely there were other 'silent successes' out there, but if they crossed my path I never noticed. I continued to struggle and forge ahead with my education, accepting the fact that I would be flying 'solo' and convincing myself that that was okay with me because I didn't need anyone else. Young

(1997) also speaks to the notion of wanting to 'belong' and the price of doing so when she states that:

It was like I didn't exist at all and in order for me to think I belonged somewhere, I had rejected my family and my "Aboriginal" Identity. It was a survival technique which, in retrospect, has shaped and constructed who I have become as a person and an educator (p.12).

As I sat through the beginning classes of our first Master's course there were many times I felt like I had entered the wrong room. I was definitely feeling like I was not capable of the task before me. This feeling was not new to me though, so I immediately went into my 'survival' mode and listened carefully to everyone else. Whenever I contributed I made sure that I had thought things out very carefully first, and only contributed in small ways to ensure I didn't make any mistakes. I knew how to 'work' this scenario because I had been there before. The question upper most in my mind was, "*Did Dr. Newman know what I was doing?*" I knew if I was careful, I could jump through the hoops required. When I think about the fear I felt in the beginning, the small risks I took to remain a part of this group in an acceptable way, and how much energy that all took on top of my 'day job', I am amazed I got through that initial experience without flight.

Even in my position as an educator, I struggled to identify 'my' community. Teaching at the senior high level generally means segregation. You teach within a specific discipline so you usually associate with those people within that discipline. In our building, we were further segregated through the physical layout. Each discipline was encompassed within a 'pod' that was physically separate from the other areas. I was further isolated as a result of teaching the Marketing courses and running the school

store. This responsibility meant that when everyone else in the building was on break or lunch and could connect, I was in the store with my students operating our business. School functions and staff meetings for me meant ensuring adequate coffee, juice, snacks, etc. were available prior to the activity and that the appropriate clean up was done immediately after. Of course I participated in various functions and meetings, but there was rarely time for making connections with other staff members. As a result of this experience, I did not feel a part of ‘staff community’ within our building.

That school has been undergoing many changes since I taught there that have a direct affect on the school community. Under the “old” structure we had a variety of staff communities which were not necessarily created for the benefit of students. Today, as more innovative ways of reaching students are being introduced into the building, more and more staff have opportunities to interact in different ways with regards to students and their needs. I do believe that it takes a great deal of effort to create community in a building that, through intention or not, creates a physical climate that separates and isolates individuals. However difficult this may be though, we know that students will look to be a part of a community. If we, as educators, do not take on the challenge of developing appropriate communities for youth to ‘buy into’ they will indeed continue to become a part of communities of their own making. Especially within a large school, there needs to be intensified efforts to foster growth in genuine communities within the building, however small and intertwined these communities may be.

Relationships: the Complexity of an Aboriginal Reality

I was fortunate in having the opportunity to share a sense of community with the Aboriginal students that I worked with at the school. I had been noticing since I began

teaching there, that we had very few Aboriginal students in our school, yet I knew there were some in the middle school, and even higher percentages at the feeder elementary school. I began to wonder why they were not attending regularly or dropping out of high school altogether. I thought that perhaps if I offered a course in Native Studies I might be able to start working with some of these students and help them with their school experiences. The course was offered, and through the use of traditional teaching methods, I was able to connect with many of these students. Parts of our early conversations supported my belief that the Aboriginal youth generally do not find our school communities to be very welcoming. This was a theme that continually came out in our conversations.

In one of our many circles, I remember asking the following question; *“If you could teach your child any one thing that you feel would be most important in life, what would it be?”* I had been trying to build on the concept of being role models. The responses I received generally included comments such as the following:

“Inner-strength and caring for others”.

“Personal strength, standing up for yourself, thinking for yourself, and believing in yourself”.

“Work hard, go for your dreams no matter what anyone says.”

My initial reaction to comments such as these was that I thought they sounded like fine teachings, but they also sounded lonely to me because they were all about individual efforts. I recall expecting that students would respond in ways indicating that family was important and so were others in your life like teachers, and other adults who could help you in tough times. I was surprised though, that no matter which circle I was in as I pressed further often their messages reinforced the alienation students felt in terms

of connecting to our school. Many of their comments, over the years, were similar to what I have captured below:

“In today’s society, we have to be strong. You can’t survive if you can’t look after yourself.”

“Teachers don’t seem to really care. They are just there to teach, it’s like they don’t realize we have a life.”

“I don’t like school at all, I don’t like being here. I don’t like teachers and I get the impression they don’t like me.”

“I hate science, I don’t go and nobody even misses me. When I am there, I sit in the room at the back. There are no other Aboriginal students in my classes except this one and it just doesn’t feel good for me.”

These are statements that I have heard over and over again during the years I worked with various Aboriginal students. The faces changed, but the comments didn’t. What I heard, loud and clear, from the young people I was working with was that they were indeed feeling alienated within the school. They did not feel connected to teachers or other students. This did not surprise me in the least. The Canadian educational system has been developed and refined by and for a white, urban, middle-class culture. Within the system, there are many ways in which the schools reinforce the feelings of inequity, which results in the promotion of a society that is based on hierarchies of race, social class, and gender. Cooke-Dallin, Rosenborough, and Underwood (2000) remind us that these biases continue to exist today. They state that “Education was, and in many cases continues to be, perceived as an instrument of ongoing colonialism that imposes a “Eurocentric”, “superior”, world view over an Aboriginal “inferior” one” (p. 84). In order to maintain the hierarchies it is necessary, through schools, to perpetuate these views. After all, schooling is a socializing process. This is not just a Canadian phenomenon as Adams (1989) points out, “While the emphasis and the content of schooling may vary in each country, the total message is one of attunement to and acceptance of the prevailing economic and social order, and of its main institutions and values” (p. 139).

If one is a part of the 'lower' social class, then discrimination in various forms will be a large part of their experience. Certainly, this was the case for me, and for many of my students. As Frideres (1993) indicates "The short-term effects of discrimination include lower marks and a tendency to drop out at an early age" (p. 179). The statistics on Aboriginal students in this province support Frideres beliefs. In comparison to non-Aboriginal students, the percentage of lower grades and drop out rates for Aboriginal students is much higher, "students who did not feel they belonged had no other options but to endure until they could become dropouts or dumpouts." (Brendtro, Brokenleg, and Van Bockern, 1990, p. 67).

On Building our Aboriginal Community

Finally, we are reaching a point in education where these inequities are becoming a part of our conversations about educational issues and are beginning to be addressed, albeit on a small, individual basis. Laara Fitznor (1995), the keynote speaker at an inner-city conference here in Winnipeg, is one of these individuals. She stated that "Students should not have to suffer from an alienating experience that may come from a school philosophy not of the students' cultural/racial/social background" (p. 11).

When you name it, you own it. Greene (1986) in her article, "In Search of a Critical Pedagogy", discusses the notion of false consciousness. As I read her work, I was able to make the connection for myself and my understanding of the world. False consciousness is when members of society internalize the beliefs of a dominate culture with regards to their inequitable value as a member of that society. These beliefs are internalized to such a degree that they are no longer questioned or doubted. Once one understands and discards false consciousness, the state of 'wide-awakeness' occurs. For

me, the state of wide-awakeness means one then has a responsibility to act. If I can name it, I own it. If I own it, I must act on it. It is no longer acceptable to just 'live with' the reality around me. I think in a subconscious way, I was already acting upon what I now perceive to be an injustice of the educational system.

When I first suggested and offered the Native Studies course, it was in some ways a selfish act. I wanted to work with Aboriginal students, but I couldn't see myself leaving the division I was working in. I valued the basic beliefs of many of the people in the division. I guess I thought; "*if I can't go to the Aboriginal students, I'll have to bring them to me*". This is exactly what happened. Although the course was not restricted solely to Aboriginal students, most of the students who did register were Aboriginal. It became a personal desire for me to create an environment in which they could feel a sense of belonging. As a teacher I believe it is my responsibility to invite students into a relationship with me that is open, encouraging, and of value to both them and me.

I began by offering the Native Studies course as a way to teach them about their cultures, encourage a sense of pride, and build a long term relationship, and connection, to the school. Our course was not a predetermined course. I felt strongly that the students coming into the course would have their own questions and needs in terms of the curriculum. Believing this, from day one we, as a group, created our exploration together.

The community we developed was built on the 'breath of our words'. Snider (1996) talks of the word as a "living thing" (p. 39). I believe it is something that comes from the soul. Our most vulnerable time is when we bring forth our words, spoken in truth, for they cannot be taken back once shared. When we are most vulnerable, we are most capable of learning, of experiencing, of expanding, but with that vulnerability

comes the potential for pain, thus we need to be supportive of all members of the community. When I share my words, I connect with people around me. “The most natural way of developing human relations is through sharing” (O’Meara & West, 1996, p.132). I begin to draw, develop, and create my community with my sharing. The more ‘right’ it feels, the more I can connect, the more I am willing to share, and to say what is important to me as an individual.

Aboriginal Pedagogy: Using the Medicine Wheel and Circle Approach

One of the pedagogical tools I used in developing our community is the Medicine Wheel. Some people look at the Medicine Wheel as a religious instrument. As Métis educator Mary Courchene (1995) explains:

Elders say the Medicine Wheel was a system of cultural values, a world view held by Aboriginal peoples as a way of living. It was a mistake to regard the Medicine Wheel teachings as a religion, rather the Medicine Wheel represents universal values that honour both personal and collective Identity (p. 56).

The Medicine Wheel concept encompasses the interconnectedness and interdependency of all. By using a Medicine Wheel approach, all participants in the community become connected and dependent on each other. “The people make up the community, therefore the four aspects of every person’s nature - the spiritual, emotional, physical, and the mental - are developed through a learning process with harmony and balance, thus achieving wholeness” (White, 1996, p. 108).

Today, I believe a healthy community to be an extension of our selves, a connection with others that is built on mutual respect and desire. I believe that it’s a living, breathing entity, forever changing. An entity made up of individuals who share space and thoughts, and grow as a result of that sharing. Within schools, community can

be somewhat structured. People are sometimes there because they share common interests, but not always. Students who take option courses at the high school level will generally choose their courses based on interests. This is not always true though, as sometimes students choose a particular option because a friend is taking it, it looks easy, it's the only choice in that slot, or 'it's better than the other options'. Generally when a community is first developed, the people involved, if they are coming together through a common desire, are included as a part of the community. To develop the community further than the initial meeting, all members of the community would need to feel they belong, that they are valued. This would also hold true for any new additions to the community over time or any members who do not share a common interest. As educators, we play a large part in the creation of community.

How a community is built, why it develops or grows, the functions it plays, etc. are all extremely important to the potential existence and long term survival of a healthy community. Community built through shared curriculum is, in my opinion, the start of a healthy community. The students with whom I shared my life came to a place where their mere presence was validated. When we came together, we cared about each other as individuals first. The use of sharing circles supported the building of our community as they allowed us to connect to each other in ways that were not often a part of the educational experience for many of my students. The sacredness of circle sharing is articulated when Courchene (1995) reminds us that:

Circle sharing is an Aboriginal tradition where the value of sharing of experiences, thoughts, and feelings are expressed. Sharing in a circle is considered a gift of giving of one's self which is held with the highest respect (p.56-57).

The areas we explored as a group, as I indicated earlier, were to a large extent determined by the group. As a member of the circle, I also had a voice in what we explored. Having this voice allowed me to include some content areas, which I felt were important, that youth may not necessarily agree with. Students were encouraged to find their voice, if need be, and to strengthen it as we moved through our curriculum. As Maracle (1996) so eloquently phrased it, “the voices of the unheard cannot help but be of value” especially if we are to develop environments that are inclusive and supportive of all (p. 3).

By sharing in the establishment of our curriculum, students were interested in what was occurring on a daily basis, so attendance becomes a non-issue. Many times when students were absent they phoned in or spoke with me personally prior to the class. If not, they would send a message with one of the other students, or other students were aware of where they were and would let me know in class. This information sharing also occurred when a student skipped class, which did happen periodically. We did not confine ourselves to the physical space or timeframe either. Classes were often held outside, which allowed us to connect with a ‘natural’ learning environment. If we were sharing with students from other schools, we used space in their buildings, or out in the community that we lived in. Although we would have regularly scheduled classes, often times we met outside of the schedule. Students sometimes chose to meet over the lunch hour when we had a class first in the afternoon so that we could extend our time together. If there were evening activities, such as community meetings, Pow Wows, and other Aboriginal gatherings, we attended as a whole group, or as individuals who were interested. The Aboriginal Youth Awards banquet became an annual activity, as well as a winter feast at a neighbouring school. Our community was living and breathing and could

not be confined within structures set out by others. We chose to own our community, and therefore we did.

Finding our Space

As I watched my students at school and in the surrounding areas I noticed how separate they were from others in the community. I remember well, and understand how, that has and does feel for me. By bringing them together in the way that I did though, I sometimes wonder if I encouraged further isolation. I recall expressing this concern with some colleagues. I don't recall who said it, but I do recall a response to it that has remained with me. It was, "The smaller and more cohesive the group, the greater the chance of exclusion of others." I think the view expressed here is certainly one worthy of careful contemplation, however, I believe that as a beginning, we need to develop a 'space' within our school that will focus on academic strength through cultural relevancy that our Aboriginal students can connect to. Brendtro, Brokenleg, and Van Bockern (1990) present the possibility of creating a connection to the larger community when they share this thought "The presence of a strong sense of belonging makes young people more receptive to guidance from other community members" (p. 38). This strong sense of belonging must be fostered and allowed to grow within the smaller community. After all, as Nozick (1992) states "A community is only as strong as its individual members" (p. 10). We can begin to consider and explore ways to connect to the larger community once strength is developed and supported within the smaller community.

Having taken a stance on how I feel with regards to segregating students, I will now explain why this cannot, and should not be done on a long-term basis. It would be impossible and possibly destructive to try to bring together the Aboriginal students in a

multicultural building and segregate them from others for their entire educational experience. Realistically speaking, the smaller community can and does become irrelevant once the students enter the halls. They attend other classes with other students, they live in a community that is multi-ethnic, and they live and breathe in a society in which they are considered and treated in an inequitable manner. To attempt to 'create' our own community without addressing the bigger picture is like sticking our head in the sand, as an ostrich does, in order to ignore what is happening. Youth, people in general, need to, and want to, exist in a fair and just society. We have the potential to make that happen, if we choose to become socially active. In order to do so, we need to become 'wide-awake' as a society. As Onore and Lubetsky (1998) suggest:

Curriculum can represent a coming together of understandings of the social and cultural relationships in the larger world, the reformulation of relationships within the classroom, and organized bodies of knowledge called subject matter. Additionally, however, curriculum negotiation, by extension, is a process, a problem, and a project to link transformative social relations within the classroom to transformative social relations in the world at large, to yoke together the cultural origins of students' questions and understandings with the cultural origins of organized bodies of knowledge (p. 255).

Extending Beyond our Community

As my students and I attended various functions in the community, we became more aware of the community at large. Some of the gatherings were to collect information about Aboriginal needs and issues. Certainly, my students were vocal and active at these gatherings, but once we returned to our classroom setting, we further discussed, but did not necessarily act upon, the issues to a great extent. This is a change for which I would now advocate. Part of the curriculum needs to allow for experiences that encourage students to become more active members/voices in the larger community.

To some extent we did this through our involvement and commitment to younger students in neighbouring schools, however, I am realizing that there was a need to be more aware and responsive to other options as they presented themselves.

One of the opportunities that came up was the introduction of an Urban Aboriginal Issues course at the Senior 4 level. Students at this level not only spent time exploring community issues, but also investigated many community resources to address the issues. Part of our curriculum allowed students to take part in appropriate community actions revolving around the issues. As Onore and Lubetsky (1996) suggest, “a key to ways in which school can operate to prevent connecting individuals in a conscious (or unconscious) manner to the existing social order is to unite the classroom with the community” (p. 256).

I believe strongly in building individual strengths, the strength to succeed in school, to develop into stronger human beings, and to resist the injustices of the world we live in. I also believe in the strength of a healthy community. As we work to develop strength within our smaller communities, we also need to work to extend that community.

Education: the Pedagogical Framework

For myself, I have just begun to think through, read through, work through, and live through my understanding of community and its intimate relationship to education. In one of our classes, Heather Hunter (1997) shared her definition of community, drawn from the work of Paulo Freire, “The definition of community is love. Education is an act of love and thus an act of courage.” This understanding is also captured (Hodgson-Smith, 2000, p. 157) in the words of a Cree grandmother, Annie, in northern Saskatchewan, “ We teach what we know as an act of love”. If we understand pedagogy

to be the science of teaching, then for Annie, pedagogy is an act of love. Hodgson-Smith (2000) helps us to understand the potential behind Annie's words when she shares her understanding of pedagogy in relation to Annie's definition:

Pedagogy is not merely styles, methods, and strategies. It is also the epistemological/philosophical framework from which one approaches instruction. If I were to describe or define Aboriginal pedagogy, it would be imperative that I speak to the philosophical and epistemological beliefs that inform and guide cultural practice (p.159).

As we struggle within in our separate spaces, and our separate lives, it would do us well to consider and reflect on a movement towards these understandings. To approach teaching as an extension of our community is to incorporate love and courage into the experience. By doing this, we cannot help but contribute to a larger, more just community. There is much that needs to be shared and done. With a strong commitment from our educational community to engage and be a part of the larger community, I know we will be creating a community that is both open and responsive to all.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Closing the Circle

I look out my window and see the seasons change. I know the sage will return soon from under the blanket of snow. As I close this circle it is with the realization that I have now spent four seasons on this land. I hear the wind as it moves across the land, leaving the trees dancing ever so gently. I have seen and appreciated the beauty of the spring when all is awakening. The vibrancy of the sunrise and sunset on a hot summer day has caught my breath so often I now look to the east and west whenever I have the opportunity, with the hope that I might recapture the intensity. The stillness of the deer and other life forms, as they move through the stunning colours of the fall season on yet another crisp day, seem almost magical, not possibly real. The majestic beauty of the trees all covered in snow, the whiteness, peacefulness of the day is so breathtaking. The gifts we are given, those that are all around us, the brilliance of the stars, the size and colour of the harvest moon, the scent of the earth, the trees, the flowers, the sound of the hummingbird wings, it all makes me wonder about the magnitude of what is around us every day. It causes me to reflect on how all of these are interwoven into my life, and how the many teachings they bring are a part of our every day lives.

How does one bring these gifts, these teachings, into the lives of our youth? Yet this is precisely what needs to happen; they were a part of our daily existence at one time. The teachings they bring us still are, or should be.

The Web of Life

The Aboriginal Worldview asserts that all life is sacred and that all forms are connected. Humans are neither above nor below others in the circle of life. Everything that exists in the circle is one unity, of one heart.

The Aboriginal worldview teaches Aboriginal people to feel humble about their existence. They are but one strand in the web of life. In the circle, of which all life forms a part, humans are dependent upon all other forces for their survival. Aboriginal worldviews also teach that humans exist to share life according to their abilities. They exist to care for and renew the web of life, and therefore, they must respect and value all forces of life. Often this worldview is called the process of humility (Youngblood, 2000, P. 259).

Who is your family? Where are you from? These two questions are almost always asked of me when I am introduced to another Aboriginal person for the first time. One of the common Aboriginal teachings is that we are all connected (Cajete, 1994). That connection is not only between people, but with all life forms as Youngblood indicates. Often when I speak of this understanding I refer to it as being relational. No matter what we do or where we go, we are always linked to our family, all life forms and the land; those which sustain us. Traditional education is about understanding yourself and how and where you fit within “All My Relations”, recognizing the interconnections and interdependency of all who reside on Mother Earth.

For Seven Generations

I already see a difference in them and their understandings compared to my own when I was their ages. They are growing into such fine people, these two older children of mine, so kind and caring, even as they struggle with their own life challenges.

I remember well the indignation my son felt when he withdrew a resource from his middle-years school on Louis Riel. At the time he was working on a paper for his Language Arts class and was pleased that he had found a resource on Louis Riel's life so quickly. Fortunately, as soon as he started to read it during his research class, he realized that this resource was filled with negative stereotypes and reinforced beliefs that our people have worked for generations to dispel. From the very first page and throughout the book, Natives were referred to as 'savages' and women were described as hot-blooded, completely uncontrollable.

When I arrived home from work that day, he was eagerly waiting for me to show me the book, knowing what my reaction would be. We had a very lengthy discussion about it, and then formulated a plan which involved bringing it to the attention of the appropriate educators and culminated with a request that, this material not necessarily be destroyed, but that it be used to educate both teachers and students on the rampant existence of 'educational resources' which continue to perpetuate many of the societal beliefs our people are continually confronted with. Had I found that book during my junior high education, (*and I very well may have as it was originally written in 1932 and simply reprinted many times*), I would not have recognized and raised the issues my son did. In fact, I probably would have believed and continued to internalize the inherent messages contained within its covers.

For my daughter, perhaps the incident that stands out most in my mind as being very different to my experiences is her expression of frustration over the fact that she is not recognized as Métis. One of her girlfriends, although not Aboriginal, does have the darker features often associated with Aboriginal people. There have been more than a few times when they are together that her friend has been asked if she Aboriginal and my daughter has not. When she first mentioned this to me, I was quietly pleased at her reaction and reflected on the fact that, while I had tried so hard to hide who I was, here was my daughter frustrated because she was not being recognized for who she is. Having a German father has resulted in both of them being much lighter skinned and fairer than I am. They are rarely, if ever, identified as being Métis. This does not surprise me, as I earlier stated, the Métis are a very diverse group. Many of the Métis are very fair, taking on the physical aspects of their European ancestors, while others are physically more associated with their First Nations ancestry.

I share these stories because I believe they are indicative of common experiences Métis youth find themselves in today. I heard stories similar to these from many of my students, and from other Aboriginal parents and educators. There is resurgence in pride within our Aboriginal communities. As healing occurs and we return to our languages, philosophies, and teachings, our young ones are emerging more grounded and more vocal. Many of them now know that we are a strong people with many gifts to offer and they are no longer prepared to simply accept the 'status quo'. It is no longer just parents or community people who are speaking up. Even though they may not be articulated in ways we expect them to be, the messages we hear from our youth are that education must be relevant, informative and truthful.

Affecting Change

Can you feel the crispness in the air? The scent of salt from the ocean is there, just under the crispness. Looking out over the vastness of the water, seeing forever leaves me with a sense of humility. I am but one person, we all are. Reflecting on this, a small pebble catches my eye. It is partially buried, but I have the urge to pick it up, so I do so. The smoothness of it feels wonderful between my fingers. It fits so well in my hand. I am reminded of the grandfather I held during the Wolf Teaching. They are connected. I cannot fight the urge to throw it as far as I can. Remember that feeling? The feeling of your arm swinging back as far as possible, and then moving it forward as quickly as you can until you release the stone? The pleasure you feel as that stone flies through the air, skipping a couple of times before it drops into the water, brings a smile to your face as you suddenly feel like a child again. You watch the rings begin to grow. The ones on the water that expand forever and you know that they will continue far beyond your sight line. You will never know where they go or what they connect to in the end.

I had the opportunity to meet with my previous superintendent on a different matter after we had both left the division. Not surprisingly, the conversation eventually became one of us reflecting on the efforts we shared in making change happen in the area of Aboriginal Education. I commented on the fact that there was a lot of work to be done, the importance of the role of educators, both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal, and the concern I have for how resources are currently stretched within the current system. At one point in the conversation I was struggling with how one supports change when there is so much that needs to be done and even though the desire might be there for educators to be more inclusive, the ability to achieve this would be constrained by the

resources available to them. His response to my expression of frustration was in keeping with the kind of leader he is and has been and reminds me of one of the reasons why I was able to 'grow' as both an educator and an individual within that division.

Don't ever underestimate the effect you had on that division. Your involvement has created Aboriginal programming, after school language classes, community activities, Aboriginal liaison positions, the hiring of Aboriginal teachers to teach Aboriginal courses, the hiring of Aboriginal educators for regular programming, the incorporation of Aboriginal resources in many different courses, the purchasing of Aboriginal resources, and ongoing professional development workshops focused on Aboriginal education at both the school and divisional level (Wiens, 2003, personal conversation).

Yes, there is a need to hire and support more Aboriginal people throughout our educational system. It is also important to remember that there are many individuals threaded throughout the web who are champions, leaders, and strong supporters of making change happen; individuals who are committed to ensuring that education is relevant and responsive to the needs of the Aboriginal community.

Each of us make decisions on a daily basis that affect the people around us. We all have the opportunity to be the champions, leaders, and strong supporters. What can I do to help support these individuals along their path? All I can do is tell my story, share my experiences, offer some suggestions as a starting point, and leave with you words of encouragement. The words I have shared so far are, I hope, a blend of this.

Moving Forward

Often educators will indicate that they don't spend too much time on Aboriginal education because they don't have any Aboriginal students. Given the demographics emerging across Canada, and in particular in Manitoba, one can no longer assume there are no Aboriginal students in their class. Métis students in particular are apt to be

overlooked, or not identified as a result of their mixed heritage. It is also important to understand that society as a whole plays a role in the oppression of Aboriginal people and until all people are educated on our histories, contributions, and ways of life, ignorance will continue to fuel oppression.

Throughout my story, I have shared various methods and approaches I have used as a learner, an educator, and an advocate. Although I have woven various suggestions into my story, I would like to leave with some specific resource suggestions as a way to guide individuals on their own journeys. I have grouped them into the following categories; people and community, organizations, Métis specific print resources, Métis websites, and some general suggestions.

As I try to sum up what I believe are some actions individuals can take, I offer the following; talk to Métis people, connect with them, share food, laughter, and words. Invite Métis people into your classroom as resources to yourself and your students; include our Elders, they are the keepers of the knowledge (*past, present, and future*). Make a point of taking part in community activities both at the local level and within the broader community. One of the most popular activities in Manitoba is the Festival Du Voyager, which is held every February in Winnipeg, Manitoba. The ability to share conversation and knowledge can only broaden our knowledge, together.

There are many Métis organizations that now exist, more so across Canada, but in Manitoba we have a few that can be invaluable to an educator looking for ideas or supports. Visit the Métis Resource Centre or the Aboriginal People's Library, both located in Winnipeg, they are valuable sources of information and more that willing to help. Another organization, Pemmican Publications, has various books written by Métis

authors. They are located within the Manitoba Métis Federation building and easily accessible.

There are many Métis authors now writing and publishing. “Métis Legacy; Volume One”, which was distributed by the Manitoba Métis Federation to select high schools in Manitoba is an example of some of the work being done. This book includes over 275 pages of resources with descriptions listed in the annotated bibliography. “Métis Legacy; Volume Two” is currently in draft form and is due out in June, 2004. It builds on volume one and has very extensive information that explores both traditional and contemporary ways of being. Understanding history from an Aboriginal and Métis perspective can only enhance your overall efforts and part of this process can be achieved by looking specifically for literature written by Aboriginal Understanding history from an Aboriginal and Métis perspective can only enhance your overall efforts and part of this process can be achieved by looking specifically for literature written by Aboriginal authors and Métis authors.

Other sources of information are also available through the world wide web. The Gabriel Dumont Institute website is an excellent example of a site with extensive information. Their mandate is to provide Métis specific materials. Another website, which is also very informative, is the Other Métis website. It incorporates a broader understanding of the diversity of the Métis community.

It is essential that the diversity of the Métis community is recognized and celebrated. In your efforts to incorporate Aboriginal resources, identify them in terms of the nations they come from, including the Métis. This is important because although there are common beliefs across the Aboriginal community, there is also much diversity to be celebrated including within the Métis community.

All I can hope for is that one person takes a small step . . .

In closing, I thank Creator for his guidance and support through this journey. In keeping with the understanding that the past, present, and future are connected, I choose to share the words and wisdom of one of our Aboriginal Scholars and of one of our Elders.

Aboriginal people need a new story. The old story – of how our lives have been – is now known, and Canadians can now perceive its demoralizing effects on Aboriginal people. But Aboriginal people recognize that we are in between stories. We do not trust the old story of government paternalism, and we are trying to get a clearer picture of our new story. Ultimately, this new story is about empowering Aboriginal worldviews, languages, knowledge, cultures, and most important, Aboriginal peoples and communities. (Battiste, 2000, p. viii)

The words of the Elder, you will recall, have been shared earlier, but the importance of the understanding that he ‘gifts’ us with bears repeating.

**“Ah dah stories you know
Dats dah bes treasure of all to leave your family
Everyting else on dis eart
He gets los or wore out.
But dah stories
Dey las forever.”**

(Dah Teef, in Maria Campbell’s
Stories of the Road Allowance People,
1995, p. 144)

This is my story, thank you for listening.

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