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# ABORIGINAL EDUCATORS' STORIES: REKINDLING ABORIGINAL WORLDVIEWS

by

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A Thesis submitted in conformity with the requirements
for the degree of Doctor of Education
Department of Adult Education, Community Development, and Counselling Psychology
Ontario Institute for Studies in Education of the
University of Toronto

***Aboriginal Educators' Stories: Rekindling Aboriginal World Views***

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## ABSTRACT

*Tansi N'tootemak, Ke nunaskamitin ni m'untoom ka kuskytayan ooma masinahikan e masinaman.* (Cree to English: Greetings my friends, I thank Creator that I am able to write this thesis.) The purpose of this study was to describe the experiences and the meanings attached to the experiences of the Aboriginal Teachers' Circle (ATC) members who worked within mainstream education systems. Conducted in Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada, the study focused on *Atchanookewina* (the stories), experiences and events, of the ATC members' practices as educators and the meanings of those experiences. Data gathering occurred (during 1994-1998) through the following ways: I documented pre-study emerging themes and issues in the lives of ATC members; Participants completed a biographic questionnaire (including a personal/career inventory of their activities); I conducted taped sharing circles and one-on-one interviews of participant experiences. Finally, I drew from

selected literature in the field (highlighting Aboriginal scholars' works) and various ATC recorded documents to make meaning of the themes and issues.

The participants of this study produced a rich array of data that reflected their backgrounds, perceptions and knowings, which were sorted into main themes then analyzed. These themes included: a biographic profile of their backgrounds; uneasy relations due to differences; career paths; cultural/heritage identities and developing Aboriginal perspectives into their professions; and finally asserting Aboriginal education through core Aboriginal knowings and processes. Through my writing up of the thesis (1998-2001) and 'storying' and analysis of their words, the participants in this research highlighted the importance of several 'truths' about the complex situation of being Aboriginal and an educator working in mainstream education: Understanding and grounding Aboriginal education in decolonizing processes and core values of Aboriginal knowings and processes. The understanding and navigating of the various tensions were evident in their stories. They indicated the importance of challenging oppressive assimilative forces while developing positive identification and connections with Aboriginal heritage. Finally their understanding of the depth and complexity of an Aboriginal educator's work and the value of children in the educational process was evident. *Ah ho, Ki nunaskamitinawaw N'totemak.* (I thank you, my friends.)

**ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

*Ke nunaskamitin ni m'untoom ka kuskytayan ooma masinahikan e masinamun.* (I thank you Creator that I am able to write this thesis.) I thank you for directing my path to work with my relations in a way that acknowledges all of life and to live in a good way. *Ke nunaskamitin* Mother Earth and all our Relations. There were many people who gifted me with their guidance for this research process and I wholeheartedly acknowledge my gratitude. Researching for and writing up this thesis has been a long, thoughtful and arduous process for which I have many Relations to thank.

First of all I say *ke nunaskamitinawaw* (I thank you all) to my family - my daughter, parents, grandparents-my ancestors, aunts, uncles, brothers (6) and sisters (7) - for grounding me in our *Naheyow* (Cree) world in a way that *Naheyow* values have affirmed and sustained me throughout my career and my study. *Ke nunaskamitin nika'way* (thank you, my mother) Hilda Fitzner for telling us many *Wesakeechak* (trickster) stories when we were children and for helping me work our *Nahayow*-Cree words into my thesis. I even enjoyed your teasing of my pronunciation! In difficult times I go back to that remembering time of my childhood belonging in love, humour, gentle ways and connectedness to sustain the hard work for the next seven generations and devotion to all of Creation.

*Ke nunaskamitinawaw* to all my special friends and colleagues, (my brothers and sisters) that have shown courage and tenacity in their pursuit of excellence and culturally relevant education and for encouraging me along the path of this thesis writing. My mentor and my 'brother' in anti-racism and equity work, Dr. Deo Poonwassie, *Ke nunaskamitin* for giving me that push to work on my doctorate in education for all the right reasons. Along this path way you helped remind me that this work is important.

*Ke nunaskamitinawaw* to my committee members Eileen Antone, Peter Gamlin, Budd Hall, Pat O'Riley, and external member Jon Young. Eileen you have been grounded in a traditional Aboriginal space through your words, your actions, your thoughts and your humour. Thank you for being there for me and reminding me that these knowings and processes can be/are 'alive and well' in academia. Peter, you have supported my work and me since I started this journey. I am so grateful for your non-intrusive support of Aboriginal knowings and processes and for your friendship. Budd, your passion for life and action lived in a good way has encouraged me to continue the struggle. You gave me the 'push' that I needed to complete my thesis journey. Pat, my new 'sister' who has provided much needed redirection and boosted my confidence in my own ways of being and encouraging me to immerse my writing in the Aboriginal knowings and processes that I know - you reminded me of the struggles I was having with Western-Indigenous

tensions around what ought to be validated in my writing. To my colleague Jon Young, I thank you for your quiet support of my work and for promoting Aboriginal education through your own work in multicultural and antiracism education.

*Ni Tanis* (my daughter) Jacqollyne who was three when I started this journey is now a vibrant, tall, beautiful 15 year old young woman. *Ke nunaskamitin ni tanis, ekwa ki saki'tin* (I thank you my daughter and I love you) for being the special one that you are. Thank you for helping me to greet and welcome our participants, (my brothers and sisters) to our home when I conducted the sharing circles and interviews. Thank you for the many times you have walked over to me while I struggled to write at the computer. You sat on my lap (yes, even as you grew), you planted kisses on my cheeks and my face, and many times you massaged my back as I worked. You asked me many questions about my work. One of your favorite questions was "Are you almost finished yet, Mom?" Thank you for reminding me that I work for you and the next seven generations.

*Ke nunaskamitinawaw*, my colleagues, special friends, brothers and sisters in Aboriginal education (Crees, Dene, Ojibways, Souix, Mohawks, Oneidas etc). You have encouraged me throughout my doctoral studies. You had the confidence that 'I could do it'. Your well wishing words boasted me along the way, kept me on task and reminded me of our responsibilities to our

children. *Ke nunaskamitinawaw* to scholars and researchers in Aboriginal education for your important words and your works. To all my Elder teachers and traditional colleagues a special *ke nunaskamitin*awaw, you have asserted our philosophies and taught me about oral traditions ('storying' what we know), patience, devotion, relationships, peace, meditation, and love for 'our ways'. Some of my teachers have been/are: My parents and grandfather (Cree), Vera Martin (Ojibway), Bruce Elijah (Oneida), Johnston Blacksmith (Cree), Maggie Hart (Cree), and Margaret Lavallee and Jules Lavallee (Ojibway), William Dumas (Cree), and Myra Laramee (Cree).

To the participants, the ATC members and participants (my brothers and sisters in Aboriginal education). Twenty-two *Ininewak* (the human beings, the people) participants in this thesis process: from the bottom of my heart I say *Ke nunaskamitinawaw, Ke nunaskamitinawaw, Ke nunaskamitinawaw, Ke nunaskamitinawaw.* You are the reasons for the direction of this thesis. Your work is honoured and celebrated through this thesis. You have gifted me and others who will read this thesis (your stories) and learn from the themes and issues in our lives as educators. This thesis advances 'our' ways to ensure that we continue healing the circle amongst all people involved in the education of children. To the Aboriginal Teachers' Circle (ATC) members and leaders when I started this research process, Myra Laramee, *Ke nunaskamitin*, for inviting

me into the ATC, and to Donna Delaronde, *ke nunaskamitin* for inviting into your circle then allowing me the 'space' to conduct my research.

Finally, I wish to thank Bruce Elijah, an Aboriginal colleague and 'traditional brother', who has inspired me to push further with my confidence in asserting Aboriginal knowings and processes in a way that is political yet spiritual. *Ah ho, Ke nunaskamitinawaw N'tootemak. Ekwa, Ke nunaskamitin N'muntoom ka kuskytayan ooma masinahikan e masinamun.*

**ABORIGINAL EDUCATORS' STORIES: REKINDLING ABORIGINAL WORLDVIEWS**

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# CHAPTER 1

## LOOKING INTO THE CIRCLE OF CONTEXTS: BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

### 1.1 Introduction

> *As I write this* [thesis], *I acknowledge and give thanks to the Creator for all of life and all the gifts we...receive to sustain the healing, wisdom, and strength in mind, body and spirit. I acknowledge and give thanks to the Creator for this opportunity to create, to give, to share, and to live in a healthy way. I follow the lead of Elders...who...start a teaching...by saying: 'this was told to me, this is what was given to me, I was asked to pass this on, I acknowledge the many teachers I have had and I thank them for these teachings[the gifts from participants] that I share with you' (Fitznor, 1998, p.23)*
>
> *We need to regain confidence in ourselves and in our teachings, not only for ourselves but for others seeking another way of looking at the world that is gentle and respective to the earth. Sharing these teachings* [this study*] in text form is one way to go...without compromising traditions: I am writing to honour my people, all of life and oral traditions (Fitznor, 1998, p.22).*

This section highlights Aboriginal[1] professionals as a critical mass of people who have the responsibility (Brant Castellano, 2000) and the potential to contribute to Aboriginal Knowings and Processes while challenging mainstream education. Aboriginal education, grounded in Aboriginal knowings and processes,

[1] Aboriginal peoples have experienced various colonial namings, labelling and classifications with the intention of outsiders identifying who we are as First Peoples of this land now called Canada. In this thesis, the term Aboriginal (also the term 'Native' when cited) is used in the generic sense to include the Métis, Status Indians, non-Status Indians and Inuit peoples in Canada (see RCAP, 1996) and the United States. Writers from the U.S. tend to use the term 'Indian' in the generic sense and many Aboriginal people still tend to use the term 'Indian' out of habit. When recalling experiences from their youth, the participants in this study tended to revert to the term 'Indian' as this was how they were referred to. However, it is falling out from generic usage particularly once people (become politicized) learn that it is a misnomer and a legal definition that does not include all Aboriginal peoples in Canada. It is important to acknowledge that these terms do not address the diversity of languages and cultures that exist in Canada and although there are common threads to the philosophical foundations local customs dictates differences in lived expressions of cultures and languages.

is an emerging discipline that is gaining credibility and prominence in academia and various educational settings (Battiste 1998; Brant Castellano 2000; Cordero, 1994; Couture, 2000; and Hampton,1993). Many supporters/leaders including Elders, leaders, community peoples and educators welcome this movement away from assimilationist polices of education and toward Aboriginal education grounded in Aboriginal knowings and processes (Battiste, 1995; Calliou, 2001; The Common Curriculum Framework for Aboriginal Language and Culture Program, 2000).

The movement to relevant programming included the proliferation of Access programs across the Canadian educational landscape where it was made possible for Aboriginal people to become educators with credentials in education degrees. Therefore, the high number of Aboriginal peoples holding professional degrees is a relatively new phenomenon in Canada (a major development in the last 25 years). The increase in these numbers was due to affirmative action access programs designed for maximizing Aboriginal students' success in post secondary institutions (McCormick,1995; Poonwassie, 1992; and RCAP, 1996). These innovative access programs reflected goals that promoted Aboriginal students to enter high need career areas such as education, social work, law, and the medical fields. The supports in these program ranged from financial assistance only to comprehensive student support systems inclusive of financial arrangements, personal, social/culture, and academic supports, and institutional supports including Aboriginal student centres.

Consequently, Manitoba now has over 700 Aboriginal professionals who are qualified educators, teachers, and school administrators (Communication with personnel, Manitoba Education and Training 1997), a dramatic increase from approximately 20 in the seventies. The majority of the Aboriginal Teachers' Circle (ATC) members who were participants in this research process have benefited from access program supports while they studied. Upon graduation, Aboriginal people tended to seek employment where institutional goals focused on redressment of past inequities and promoted Aboriginal education/programs.

Furthermore, I contend that Aboriginal graduates do heed to the calls from our communities to stay connected through their work and to contribute to the continuance of our heritages, Aboriginal self-determination, lived culture and language experiences (Castellano et al, 2000). In addition, many Aboriginal scholars (Antone, 2000; Battiste, 1995; Brant Castellano, 2000; Calliou, 2001; Hampton, 1993) noted that graduating from a mainstream institution should not mean forsaking culture, language and Indigenous worldviews. Smith (1999) reflected this sentiment when she stated "...they do not want this [western education process] to be achieved at the cost of destroying people's Indigenous identities, their languages, values and practices" (p.134).

Some Aboriginal Manitobans who pursued a degree in education worked in the City of Winnipeg as teachers, education consultants, university and college instructors, and administrators. The experiences of these educators and the knowledge they have, needed to be documented and analyzed to enhance the

progress and development of Aboriginal Peoples in the first instance, and Manitobans and Canadians in the second. However, the scope of this thesis was much smaller in that only a fraction of Aboriginal educator experiences were documented. The ATC of Winnipeg, Manitoba, a self-determining organization attracted a number of educators to its membership, and it is this group of people that were participants in this study. I discuss in more detail the ATC as a thriving and Aboriginal-based organization under the heading of "The Aboriginal Teachers' Circle", in this thesis.

Some Aboriginal educators taught in Winnipeg inner city where there are high numbers of Aboriginal students. For example, Winnipeg's largest school division, Winnipeg School Division #, 1 (WSD #1) has a population of over 35,000 students of whom 13,000 are Aboriginal (Courchene, 1997). This number included students who came from First Nation's communities (reserves) across Northern Manitoba and North Western Ontario to attend high school. The number of Aboriginal students in Winnipeg is further boosted from attendance in post-secondary institutions.

In spite of the high representation of Aboriginal youth in the school system, the curriculum still maintained a strong mainstream focus that did not meet the needs of Aboriginal students. "Aboriginal students were not graduating and they were dropping out at a high rate, and at a younger age than their non-Aboriginal peers. The challenge was there for educators, administrators, and the community to do something" (Courchene, 1997, p.54). Furthermore, only a few

Aboriginal professionals taught in the system. Another point to highlight here is that the Aboriginal youth population is the fastest growing segment of Canadian peoples (RCAP, 1996). Therefore, it is critical that Aboriginal teachers are available to work with youth in ways that are grounded in Aboriginal knowings and processes. Courchene (1997) indicated that youth workshops held in the early 90's determined Aboriginal student needs and aspirations were not being met. Furthermore, advocacy groups recognized and advanced the idea that role modelling, mentor relationships, and culturally relevant education must also be available for our students.

Over the past 15 years, a number of political events took place that pushed the agenda to take Aboriginal education and curriculum changes seriously. For example, a number of advocacy groups (the WSD#1, Race Relations Taskforce, Urban Aboriginal Advisory Council, Nomination and election of Aboriginal Trustees, Thunder Eagle Society and The Aboriginal Teachers' Circle) were involved in the struggle to advance quality and relevant education. Therefore, the development and establishment of a policy on Aboriginal education and culturally relevant programming in WSD #1 occurred only after extensive lobbying was carried out by Aboriginal colleagues, parents, leaders and supporters (Courchene, 1997). The intent of the policy on Aboriginal education promised to address a number of areas where the division could improve its polices and practices for quality and equity, and culturally relevant education with the Aboriginal community in mind.

Finally, two schools that represented Aboriginal cultures and students, and an integration of Aboriginal perspectives opened. Children of the Earth High School (COTE) opened in 1991 (Courchene 1997), while the Nichi Mahkwa Elementary school opened in 1994 (Laramee, 1997). Administrators moved to hire primarily Aboriginal teachers to work in these schools where extensive orientation toward culturally appropriate programming would take and took place. The principals of these schools were qualified educators who were also Aboriginal. In addition Aboriginal teachers held the majority of the teaching positions and they were expected to work from Aboriginal knowings and processes. The Curriculum design of these schools reflected goals and objects grounded in Aboriginal philosophical perspectives (Courchene, 1997). It could be said that the openings of these schools were examples of how the context of the WSD #1 was transformed through education and pressure from the Aboriginal community. Finally, Aboriginal educators had the opportunity to ground their work in Aboriginal philosophies and practises for the sake of quality and culturally relevant education for Aboriginal children. Many Aboriginal educators were immersed in the struggles of these movements as they continued to teach in various schools.

From time to time, the ATC has attempted to obtain the number of Aboriginal teachers working in WSD#1. However, tracking the number of Aboriginal individuals who held positions in the school division was not easily available. A telephone call to the division revealed that about 100 individuals had

self-identified as having Aboriginal ancestry, although there were approximately 2700 teachers employed by the WSD#1 (Personal Communication with WSD # 1 personnel, 1997). It is important to keep in mind those individuals who had self-identified as Aboriginal included support staff, teachers' aides, teachers and administrators holding either part time or full time positions.

Further, the ATC has advanced the idea that the division must adopt equity representation in their hiring of teachers such as that recommended by the Aboriginal Justice Enquiry (1992). The hiring of Aboriginal educators would contribute to the development and confidence of Aboriginal society through role modelling, mentoring and by offering curriculum relevant to the needs and aspirations of Aboriginal youth and the Aboriginal community. Policies, such as the Aboriginal education policy in the WSD#1, intended to advance Aboriginal education goals and objectives is a necessary step to support the work that Aboriginal educators inevitably ended up doing, evident in the stories within this thesis. However, in spite of these policies, the struggle to maintain momentum was ever present. For example, the ATC, along with other Advocacy groups, have had to lobby at various times to ensure that hiring and retention of Aboriginal teachers, and retention and development of culturally relevant programs remained a priority for the division: in policy and in practice.

Many of the teachers that held positions in the Aboriginal cultural based schools during the writing of this thesis were Aboriginal and members of the ATC. Although not all of the teachers from these schools and who were

members of the ATC participated in this study. Participants in this study were Aboriginal educators who held positions primarily in various schools throughout the WSD#1 and also throughout other educational institutions in Winnipeg. Therefore the focus of this study was not about the Winnipeg School Division (it just so happens that the majority of the ATC educators are employed by WSD#1), rather it was the Aboriginal Teachers' Circle members. This foregoing information provides some context of the importance to promote Aboriginal education grounded in Aboriginal knowings and processes with Aboriginal educators who are willing to support and orient their philosophies and practices in this direction. These directions are similar to the goals of the ATC. I will now discuss the organization of the ATC in order to set the next context for this study.

### 1.2 The Aboriginal Teachers' Circle (ATC)

> *Together with the wisdom of our ancestors, the ancient teachings and the knowledge and experience we have acquired from involvement in the mainstream educational frameworks, we have the potential to reclaim the responsibility to help our children acquire the original value we placed on our famil[ies], culture, and life. The emphasis during this conference will be to profile Aboriginal educators...who have developed an expertise...who have valuable information and experiences to share.(Laramee cited in Fitznor, 1997, p.5)*

Just as this quote highlights, Aboriginal educators have 'valuable information and experiences to share'. In this section, as a prelude to this study, I profile the ATC as an organization that has thrived through the energy of 'service' principles (Hampton, 1993) reflective of Aboriginal values. The ATC is a

grass-roots organization grounded in Aboriginal self-determination, histories, issues, and cultural and language reclamation driven by the concern for Aboriginal children and what the future holds for them. Its aims are to advance culturally relevant Aboriginal education and advocate for Aboriginal knowings and processes in educational settings. The ATC formed in 1988 when a small circle of Aboriginal teachers determined it was necessary to address common experiences, issues and goals that emerged from their discussions regarding Aboriginal students and their own experiences. They also heard of these same concerns from networking with other Aboriginal teachers and educators (Delaronde, 1997, personal Communication). This group called themselves 'The Aboriginal Teachers' Committee'. However, following a few informal meetings and gatherings to determine the purpose and direction for the organization 'The Aboriginal Teachers' Committee was renamed 'The Aboriginal Teachers' Circle'. The ATC executive developed a mission and goals' statement with the intent of becoming incorporated. The ATC Mission and Goals statement (Fitznor, 1997, p.6) reads as follows:

### 1.2.1 ATC Mission Statement

Aboriginal Teachers' Circle is a network of Aboriginal teachers that provides opportunities for healing the circle among all people involved in the education of Aboriginal children.

The Aboriginal Teachers' Circle is guided by the following principles:

That Aboriginal children are our future.

That the learning environment must reflect the needs of Aboriginal children and their diverse backgrounds.

That facilitators of learning for Aboriginal children demonstrate respect in order to develop relationships were reciprocal learning can flourish.

That teachers of Aboriginal descent assume the right to be practitioners of Aboriginal educational leadership.

### 1.2.2 ATC Goals [And Objectives]

In carrying out our mission statement the Aboriginal Teachers' Circle will encourage Aboriginal educators to develop to their fullest potential.

To foster the development of culturally appropriate curriculum.

To advocate for the total integration of Aboriginal perspectives in all areas of the curriculum.

To provide opportunities for personal and professional development of Aboriginal teachers.

To facilitate culturally appropriate educational opportunities for all educators working with Aboriginal children.

To encourage and support Aboriginal educators towards leadership positions in the area of education.

To provide opportunities to develop the leadership skills of Aboriginal educators.

To liaise and promote positive relations in community members and organizations who are involved in the education of Aboriginal children.

### 1.2.3 ATC Accomplishments

Since 1988, the ATC members carried out a number of activities that reflected its goals. We have sponsored and organized conferences; shared and exchanged information, organized and shared information about professional development opportunities. We have discussed and confronted educational issues and lobbied for changes that affected us as Aboriginal people (inclusive of the circle of children and adults) and as professionals; and we participated in various organizations that served Aboriginal peoples. We have acted as a support group for each other and others who approached us about our opinions on educational issues affecting Aboriginal communities. We have been called upon for assistance related to educational matters, sponsored social, educational and cultural gatherings, and advocated on a number of issues related to Aboriginal education. The activities carried forth depended on the dedicated volunteer and service contributions and educational leadership capacities of the educators. Often, the work took place after "paid work" hours. At the ATC's tenth anniversary gathering in, then co-chair Donna Delaronde (and ATC member Val Georges) presented a fact sheet that highlighted several initiatives, which the ATC had pursued up to 1998. The list reflected those activities outlined in this paragraph.

Attendance at monthly meetings ranged anywhere from 10 to 20 people and more where various events attracted more people. For example, in the

spring of 1995 the ATC held its first conference on Aboriginal education with the theme of "Education as a Healing Practice". At this conference, educators of Aboriginal education delivered thirty-eight presentations. An overwhelming majority of the presenters were Aboriginal individuals who worked in the WSD #1 and who were also members of the ATC. Well over 150 people per day attended this conference, an excellent demonstration of support and need for such a conference. Although the planning committee anticipated that only Winnipeg educators might be interested in a conference like this, a number of people attended from outside of the city and the province. As part of my faculty position at the Faculty of Education, University of Manitoba, I received a grant to co-ordinate the compilation and editing of selected conference proceedings of the 1995 ATC conference on Aboriginal education (Fitznor, 1997). This project entitled, "Resource Development for Studies in Aboriginal Education", was completed in March 1997. The ATC and the Faculty of Education of the University of Manitoba were identified as joint occasional publishers of this project. Subsequent conferences and seminars were organized in 1997, 1998, 1999, and 2000 that brought educators and community people together with leaders in the field of Aboriginal education.

### 1.2.4 ATC Membership

The Aboriginal Teachers' Circle list identified a membership of 88 educators (Membership update of 1997). Recruiting members for the ATC

occurred through (a) educators seeking to join the organization, and (b) networking amongst the teachers (i.e. "word of mouth" about Aboriginal Peoples working at various educational institutions), individuals were approached for permission to add his/her name to the list. Once addresses were obtained members received notices of meetings, minutes and information about events hosted by the group. The ATC membership included educators from schools, community colleges, universities, teacher aids, community development education workers, and civil servants.

At the time of this thesis writing, the majority of ATC members worked in the WSD # 1 where it was easier to contact each other for meetings and events. It is important to note that not all the individuals listed on the ATC roster were active participants to the meetings or gatherings. They did, however, receive through phone calls or written communication about any news of meetings, minutes and gatherings. The ATC was as much a 'moccasin telegraph' for exchange and distribution of information and a support group as it was a leader for advancing Aboriginal education. The term 'moccasin telegraph', a colloquial Aboriginal knowing that refers to the relaying of relevant and/or 'insider' news by utilizing an extensive network of contacts and communication through word of mouth of Aboriginal family, friends and colleagues. It was amazing how relatives and friends seemed to know to pass on stories of the news and events. It was common for a news event to happen in the city of Winnipeg and that news can travel as far north as Churchill, Manitoba - about 1400 kilometres away and back

to Winnipeg again. Sometimes, the only way people found out about Aboriginal ceremonies and other cultural events were through the 'moccasin telegraph'.

### 1.3 Researcher's Participation in the ATC

In 1992 the ATC co-Chair invited me to become a member of their Circle when it was determined that it was appropriate to extend their membership beyond classroom teachers. They felt that inviting individuals with expertise from the broader field of Aboriginal education (such as Post Secondary education) would support their efforts. Various members of the ATC knew me because I was involved in (a) many teacher in-service sessions, (b) conferences and seminars with focus on Aboriginal education, Aboriginal women's groups, cross-cultural education, anti-racism education and (c) access programming. In addition, a number of these educators are my friends and colleagues, and thus to draw on an Aboriginal relational concept, have been my 'brothers and sisters' and 'auntie's and uncles' for some time. Also, there tends to be a network of Aboriginal professionals that come together to work on common issues, needs and aspirations when circumstances warrant a gathering whether it reflects political, activist, social or cultural objectives. Educators, teachers in particular, seem to 'rise to the occasion' when the climate demands a concerted response to a situation.

Since my involvement with the ATC group, I contributed to the ongoing functioning of the group in the following ways. I participated actively in meetings

(chairing, taking minutes, following up on tasks etc.). I helped to clarify and resolve issues. I assisted in writing up briefs, position papers and letters; co-chaired an Aboriginal teachers' conference planning committee; presented talks and workshops; acted as a link between the group and the university; and acted as a mentor for individuals wishing to pursue graduate work or professional development. In addition, I was the principal investigator for the research project mentioned earlier in this paper. I believe that I earned the trust and respect of the ATC membership and that I gained the reputation of being dedicated and committed to advancing Aboriginal education grounded in Aboriginal knowings and processes.

As a researcher who is Indigenous, I contend that philosophies and practices that uphold the spirit, needs and aspirations (culture, language, spirituality, economics, politics etc.) of Aboriginal Peoples need to be experienced by all Aboriginal Peoples and supported by all Canadians. I am not implying that working with Mainstream perspectives are wrong although I challenge their taken for granted dominance and privileging of Eurocentricity. However, I argue that working from that perspective alone is wrong and it has failed, oppressed and colonized Aboriginal peoples. It is slowly becoming more and more clear to the general public that Aboriginal people are not interested in assimilationist education that forsakes our cultures, languages, perspectives, philosophies and practises (RCAP, 1996). We need to advance Aboriginal knowings and philosophies if we are to succeed as a people (Brant Castellano, 2000; Cajete,

1994; Kirkness, 1992; RCAP, 1996) enriched with our own cultural and linguistic needs and aspirations in the educational system, and in Canadian society. Therefore, as a researcher, I contend that the following factors prepared me to develop the research expertise to pursue this study. (1) I had sustained ongoing involvement and familiarity with the ATC. (2) I had extensive experiences teaching courses in cross-cultural education, anti-racism and Aboriginal education (grounded in Aboriginal core values), and teaching Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students. (3) I had extensive experience in working with Aboriginal peoples as colleagues and students in addition to my lived experience as a Cree woman who is from a northern community. (4) I had extensive committee/service work in the areas of Aboriginal education, anti-racism work, social activism on mainstream committees and grassroots organizations. (5) My personal and professional frames of references are grounded in Aboriginal philosophies and practices (inclusive of a decolonizing approach), and antiracism theories. Later in this paper, I will expand on how my role, as the researcher, prepared me to work on this thesis process. (See section on "Situating Myself in the Study".)

### 1.4 Research Needs and Aspirations

The documentation of our career experiences as Aboriginal peoples within mainstream education and what those experiences mean for us needed to be shared and shared in a way that grounds our voices in Aboriginal knowings and processes. This process of research 'documentation' of Aboriginal educator voices

can become *atchanookewina* (stories), knowledge or 'teachings' that can/will/shall emerge from under the rubble of the colonization dust in a way that both decolonizes our minds and hearts and advances Aboriginal knowings and processes. Battiste reminds us that we now have an opportunity to build a new story. "Ultimately, this new story is about empowering Aboriginal worldviews, languages, knowledge, cultures, and most important, Aboriginal peoples and communities (Battiste in Brant Castellano, 2000, p.viii). McLaren (1994), further acknowledges the transforming importance of 'storying':

> The act of telling our stories, of speaking our narratives, inserts us as active agents in history. And not just any history but a history that matters, a history informed by critical practice. And in making history that matters, we simultaneously open up a space for the telling and retelling of our stories in ways that no longer require us to ask permission to narrate the sensuous specificity of our lives (p.160).

Through our stories, we as Aboriginal peoples can think and act in ways that express our voices. Just as Aboriginal educator Valaskakis (2000) states, "Stories are narratives - written or visual - and academic writing has long recognized that the narratives we express are windows on who we are, what we experience, and how we understand and enact ourselves and others" (p.76). She cautioned however that telling of stories is subject to potential distortions so we must use care in how we tell them and how we interpret them. She challenged the stereotyped ways in which Aboriginal peoples have been represented in literature both historically/today and how "the impact of these images and the stories they tell transform each of us and the social world in which we live (p.78)". For different reasons, we are cautioned that "*writing* about Aboriginal

perspectives risks overshadowing of the importance of *speaking or voicing* ...the heritage of oral traditions" (Fitznor, 2000, p.81). Brant Castellano (2000) also reflected this caution and added that "writing things up gives authority to a particular view and a particular writer" (p.31). These cautions were 'teachings' for me to treat the stories of the participants with respect and integrity and work to ensure that the representations of the participants' experiences spoke for themselves. My own commenting on their words came from a desire to disrupt westernized thinking (Graveline, 1998; Smith, 1999) and to celebrate our Aboriginal knowings.

Furthermore, Marker (2000) reflected on how he perceived schooling stories as oral tradition as a form of contemporary oral tradition. He cautioned that when we use stories as research that we must place/connect them in the context of communities in addition to the actual research site. In order to attend to context I devoted a great deal of space in this thesis to writing up the local context (background, educators spaces, my space, our experiences etc) that hopefully will allow the full power of the stories to do their work (Marker). The sharing and analyses of 'stories' collected and harvest through a variety of interactions is what this thesis is about. However the tensions between western expectations of anonymity and the Aboriginal expectations of expressing our stories in open and respectful ways is evident here because the names and career sites seem unreal as they are rendered through the academic "ethics" of imposed renaming. However, this also highlights the complexity of working as an

Aboriginal person within a Mainstream milieu without dimming the candle of my heritage (Calliou, 2000; Hampton, 1993, Hermes, 1998). So, I listened to, I heard, I interpreted cautiously and respectfully the stories that became the substance, centred around the themes, that is the focal point of this thesis.

# CHAPTER 2

# SITUATING RESEARCHER-SELF IN THE STUDY

## 2.1 Introduction

*To honor Tradition*
*I begin with my Self-In-Reflection (Graveline, 2000, p.361).*

*I have heard over and over again from the Elders that you must know where you come from to know where you are going...(Monture-Angus, 1999, p.35).*

*What is distinctly Aboriginal is the way in which past, present and future are understood to be inextricably connected. We often hear our people say, 'You have to know where you come from to know where you are going' (Anderson, 2000 p.15)*

In order to situate myself in this study, I invoke an Aboriginal tradition of orality: *Atchanookewin* (storytelling), albeit in writing. In this section I tell a story about me: where I started my path, where I have been, and where I am going with this research. Like the quotes above, one of the 'gifts' of knowledge that I learned from Aboriginal knowings and processes is the importance to acknowledge who we are and tell where we are going. Our Elders tell us that we must understand our beginnings and their impacts on us (Graveline, 2000, Monture-Angus, 1999, Kirkness, 1992). We must know how we are situated in our world (Cajete, 1994; McLaren, 1994) and know our inner selves in order to be responsible to our outer world: those around us, all our relations, inclusive of Mother Earth and all her inhabitants (Fitznor, 1998). In so doing, we name who we are and acknowledge our history. This is what I am attempting to do: share

my situatedness in this study, as the researcher, within my multitude social identities and show that central to this location is my relationship and identity as an Aboriginal person. I recognize that I hold certain privileges that the participants in this thesis do not. I am aware of the fact that I might have been viewed as someone who has more "power" and/or "knowledge" so I could then do this work. I hoped that this was not the way the participants thought. I locate myself herein this study to demonstrate my commitment and my ability to conduct this research as an Aboriginal woman who works openly from Aboriginal knowings and processes or as stated in some cases as 'Aboriginal perspectives'. By this I mean that I centred Aboriginal histories, contemporary experiences, cultural ways, philosophies, spirituality and wisdom into my work as an educator. I am aware of that my statements might alert possible concerns about biases that might bring a frown of disapproval from "objective" western-trained academics, but my multiple identities and Aboriginal-based framework guided my enquiry and analysis (Bishop, 1998; Calliou, 2001; Cajete, 1994; Cole, 2000; Colorado, 1988; Graveline, 2000; Hampton, 1993). In chapters 3 and 4 of this thesis the tensions around finding relevant research methodologies are apparent. I also want to make clear this fact: I have worked in primarily mainstream institutions most of my career and I have always promoted and advanced Aboriginal self-determination, philosophies and knowledge whenever I could, although I was not always aware that was what I was doing. I simply worked from my own knowings. In so doing, I have worked well in understanding and

functioning in the mainstream world though I have not always been comfortable in this 'space' because of the constant struggle to assert my identity as an Aboriginal person who is competent in her work. I present my story here in the attempt to connect to the participants' stories. My story appears in Italics and single-spaced here for format consistency with the participant's words/stories. Hermes (1998) stated that she used "a multiplicity of voices: my own reflective notes and the words of other community members, Elders, and students as well as other writers to represent the community involvement that I (being the sole author) was taking credit for" (p.156). I, too am aware that I am the sole author and I take credit for this work – even though I credit the 'gifted' voices and commitment of participant involvement. Therefore, through this thesis there are many voices speaking – not just mine.

### 2.1.1 *Ni t'achimowin* (My Story )

***Tansi n'totemak**, greetings my relations. First let me let you about living with four names throughout my life. I will discuss them briefly here because in some way they reflect my own personal and career development over the years and the impacts of Aboriginal and Cree cultural influences on my life.*

*When I was born, I was named and "Christened" Eileen Louise Fitzner, a name I had for 37 years. I was named after an aunt and my last name is from my German grandfather. In accordance to the patriarchal laws of Canada our family was imposed with an early stamping of European colonized names whereby my paternal ancestors' names stood out and those of my maternal ancestors' names became lost in the patriarchal shuffle.*

*When I was a toddler of about 1½ years old my maternal Oji-Cree **mosoom** (grandfather) to whom I was close named me **'missisak'***

*(horsefly). The story for naming me* ***missisak*** *goes like this: ni mosoon (my grandfather) was caring for me one day. The crib I was playing in was located near a window upon which a* ***missisak*** *was bouncing about the windowpane.* ***Ni mosoom*** *saw me trying to catch the* ***missisak,*** *which I caught then promptly popped it into my mouth and started chewing. My grandfather raced across the room to retrieve me from chomping on anymore* ***missisaks!*** *From that day he called me* ***missisak,*** *a name that is still with me today and it will always be with me. In my Cree culture many of us get names of endearment and/or affection if we have been found in memorable and/or humorous situations such as this. I am still called* ***missisak*** *by my family and community members to provoke humour and memories. In retrospect, this name has had an interesting impact upon my thinking as I grew up. This is a name I have always cherished because it came from people who were/are special to me. There have been times when my siblings would tease me about the name and I would defend the name, it is mine because* ***ni mosoom*** *gave it to me and therefore it is special. I would ask 'what's wrong with horse flies, they are cute little creatures'? Of course, I would not want to eat them anymore (goodness, I only ate one in my life!). Nor would I really like to have them around me, but I have often thought about the role of the horsefly in Creation and in my life. The influence of this name on me today was/is: I have often thought about my work of lobbying and advocating for and persuading mainstream about the importance of advancing Aboriginal knowings and processes over the years. It reminds me that so often-dominant society have ignored us and hoped we will go away, in trying to make us disappear we have been subjected to many atrocities over the years but we keep coming back! Just like the horsefly, we want it to 'go away' and not 'bug' us. Consequently, like the horsefly that reminds us that* ***all of life is important*** *and s/he will keep coming back as she reminds us every summer. Likewise, we, as Aboriginal peoples, keep reminding dominant society that we keep coming back and coming out and expanding our circle. We are here to stay!*

*My current name is Laara Fitznor. I have lived with this name since 1987. At the time that I changed my name from Eileen Louise Fitzner I thought I was defying the "Christianizing" process of naming where I could pick my own name. Of course, I now realize it is still a colonial name! However, it is a name with which I am comfortable, perhaps because I chose it.*

*My spirit name is* ***Wapiski Meskanak Iskwew*** *(White Turtle Woman), which signifies the meaning of a woman who brings forth a path of light/knowledge. I received this name in the spring of 1998 when I offered Elders some tobacco to conduct a Naming ceremony. I felt that*

*the time was right for this ceremony and that these Elders were also colleagues with whom I had the privilege of working and teaching. I was moving to the city of Toronto at the time and I felt that I needed that cultural and spiritual connection and reminding my roots. My Elder colleagues told me that this name was gifted to me in recognition of my work in the community and educational institutions to advance Aboriginal knowings and processes. I was honoured that they recognized my work.*

*I shared my 'names' to present the stages of my life in understanding the 'naming process' from different vantage points. Now let me tell you about my background. When I was a young girl, I identified and lived with my Cree heritage and cultural ways. It is only after leaving my community that other categories to describe who I am surfaced through various situations. So now I am aware of the many names, labels, or categories that attempt to impose definitions of which we are as First Peoples of this land. Now when I am asked I state that I am Aboriginal (RCAP and Canada's definition of First Peoples of this land),* ***Inninew*** *(The People),* ***Naheyow iskwew*** *(a Cree woman). I offer the information that I am also inundated with the government-designated classifications. These classifications are Metis (my family was considered Metis because of our mixed blood) and non-Status Indian (my family was also labelled non-status Indian because our ancestors were stripped off their status as Indians due to discriminatory clauses). Yet I was eligible to gain legal Indian Status (recognition by the Government of Canada "Indians" who have treaty defined rights as First Peoples). Recently I applied for and gained reinstatement as a status Indian under Bill C-31 of the Indian Act, so now I am also classified as a Bill C-31 Status Indian. I maintain that these political, legal, cultural, linguistic descriptions of my Aboriginality are important to locate here to demonstrate the added complexities to my life and my work as an Aboriginal educator. Further these 'names' reflect those labels that have been imposed on us and replaced our Indigenous names. Finally, I do not yet know which Clan my family was from; I am in the processing of learning about this responsibility.*

*Again I stress the fact that I find these the political, legal, and cultural labels necessary to mention here because it demonstrates how the oppressive political and colonial making of Canadian society has impacted on my family (my Ancestors) as treaties were crafted primarily to suit European settlers and Canadian mainstream government. Following the Treaties, which were supposed to describe Canada's Crown obligations to Aboriginal Peoples the Indian Act was introduced, proving to be a "...regime [that] seems to be both incoherent and fatally incomplete. It was conceived and used as an expression of Eurocentric values" (YoungBlood Henderson, 1995, p.258). These policies have impacted*

*upon my own family through legal boundaries of political interference. For example, when the Indian Act was legislated, both the maternal and paternal sides of my family were stripped off their status as "Indians", they were relegated by the state to a "non-Status Indian" which simply meant that s/he could/might have had recognition as an Indian within the Indian Act.*

*Prior to it's amendment in 1985, the Indian Act had discriminatory clauses against (a) an Indian woman marrying a non-Indian man, (b) Indian people who purchased private or crown lands, and (c) Indians who pursued any profession. In all cases Aboriginal relatives lost their status as Indians and became non-Status Indians regardless of the biological depth of Aboriginal heritage.*

*In the cases of my family ancestors, these losses were due to the discriminatory clauses related to the 'Indian women marriage clause' and to Indians gaining private property. About 1920, my paternal Cree status Indian grandmother married my paternal German (immigrant-to-Canada) grandfather. Therefore my paternal Cree grandmother lost her status as an "Indian". Her identity was subsumed under her husband's much like the women (in mainstream Canada) of her day were, hence my German surname. My father was one of four offspring from this relationship. Because of the prevailing attitudes of his day, he was not considered Canadian. Rather he was as labelled "half-breed", Metis, or non-Status Indian by others (Whites and Indians alike). Even though he was raised in the same First Nation community with his Cree "Indian" grandparents, the "Colonial Canada Indian agent" of the day ousted him from the "Reserve" when he turned 18 because he had no "rights" as a Status Indian resident.*

*On my maternal side, my Oji-Cree grandfather (mixed Oji-Cree and Scottish-3rd generation) likely lost his Indian status because he bought Crown property in Northern Manitoba. When he married my maternal Cree status Indian grandmother she lost her status as an Indian because of her marriage to an already non-Status Indian man. My mother was one of four living offspring from this relationship and her status was defined in the same way as was my father's: "Half-breed", Metis, non-Status Indian. Through the 1985 amendment of the Indian Act that challenged discriminatory clauses, my parents and many of my siblings, cousins, and aunts and uncles applied for reinstatement as "status Indians".*

*Therefore, in order to highlight the confusion that can be caused by such labelled in many instances I introduce my Aboriginality as 'Inninew, Metis-Cree, non-Status Indian recently became "Indian" under Bill C-31 of*

*the Indian Act'. Sometimes I state these introductions to express sardonic humour about how the complexities of these identities were imposed on Aboriginal Peoples and how they subsequently created classes within classes (Youngblood, 1995)! I use irony to reveal the craziness of imposed identities. When I have done this I usually get responses that reflect nervous laughter, shocked looks (like I don't know who I am), sympathetic laughter, or a 'knowing' that comes with laughter of agreement. Also, I do this to demonstrate the added complexities of my identity as an Aboriginal Person and to point out one of the many government imposed policies that were/are confrontational and contradictory to Aboriginal Peoples' ways of life. I was amazed at how these identities played out in the school system as I grew up.*

*I come from a small Aboriginal community with a population of 500 in Northern Manitoba. The community, not a reserve, is comprised of Status Indians, non-Status Indians, Metis, and Settlers. I am the third daughter of a family of 6 brothers (includes one adopted nephew) and 7 sisters, a father and mother. We lived with our maternal grandfather on the property he purchased located near a lake circa 1915 in our community. Our nearest neighbours were about 1/2 mile away. I literally grow up in the "bushes". We lived without modern amenities like running water, electricity, television, etc., at least until we older siblings were around 12 years of age. We lived interactively with the land as did our Cree ancestors.*

*My father held jobs as a trapper, fisherman, hunter, labourer, and later as a driller for the mining companies that "mined" near our communities. We spent many springs on the traplines and those times we were pulled out of school, just in time to travel over the ice to our trapline and return home after the ice thawed. We were gone for at least a month and more each time. We grew vegetable gardens, and harvested traditional berries, food vegetation and medicines (in western terms: herbs and plants). We preserved fish, moose meat, vegetables and berries drawing from traditional and modern food preservation methods. Our handcrafted clothing and footwear made from clothe, animals hides and furs supplemented store-bought clothing and footwear.*

*When we harvested medicines we ensured that 'tobacco' was placed in the earth as a way of 'honouring Mother Earth'. It was to show appreciation for the gifts the land gave to us to nurture our health and welfare. This practice, I came to understand, was a tradition passed down from my people but one that was not celebrated nor promoted in my mainstream-based schooling. This act became second nature to us so that each and every time we took any medicine for our use, tobacco was*

*offered. In my adult years I came to learn and appreciate the fact that this was/is one of the important part of our traditions in Aboriginal knowings and processes that was/is lost to many of our peoples as a result of colonization.*

*I remember my family as hard working, independent, and self-sufficient people as we made our life in this small northern community. There were food abundance times and there were lean times. Somehow, our parents provided what they needed to for us children.*

*I attended a mainstream school first in a one-room school house then in my third grade we attended school in a different building that had at least four class rooms. I remember the "different world" we encountered when we went to school. It felt so alien and different than that we learned at home. Our Cree ways and language were definitely not reflected in the school system. In fact, we were not allowed to speak our language. If and when we dared to speak our language we were punished by being scolded or through the withholding of rewards. In spite of many incidents that served to alienate me (acts of racism and stereotyping), I remember that I enjoyed learning new things. I had white teachers who were clearly racist and I had white teachers who were supportive and open although they still taught from mainstream values.*

*I left my community at the age of 15 to go to a boarding high school (important to note that this was not like the "Indian Residential Schools" that caused so much grief for our people) that was about 200 miles away. The school was a mixed Aboriginal and White students who came from rural communities that had no high schools in the communities. There again, I encountered a different world from what I was accustomed to in many ways. Later, I moved to an urban centre where I again encountered different levels of stereotyped and racist attitudes and behaviours for many years because of the negative significance attached to cultural differences (if you are not from the mainstream something is wrong attitude). I have been confronted with incidents of racism, stereotyping and prejudices and constantly having to "prove" to many of my non-Aboriginal colleagues and friends that Aboriginal people are people too who contribute to Canadian society. In spite of these experiences, I do acknowledge that I had many other mainstream colleagues who have been respectful, sympathetic and supportive of Aboriginal needs and aspirations. Learning from these experiences has been an ongoing education for me as I learn each day to decipher the different ways that life gets express through my multiple identities. I have learned to take life and try to live it fully, and in many*

*instances I am reminded of how my upbringing had prepared me in more ways than I originally thought.*

*I want to make clear that the education I received from the mainstream was that of EuroCanadian and immigrant perspectives. Any references made to Aboriginal peoples were always that of stereotyping, poor living conditions and many social ills and that we were a burden to the federal government. Sitting in classrooms and hearing these perspectives was not an easy task for me, much like Antone (2000) indicated in her own journey in her chapter titled "Empowering Aboriginal Voice in Aboriginal Education" it was when I started to gain confidence to speak up that I was able to begin to counter what I heard, particularly in my university classes. My Aboriginal education and Aboriginal knowings and processes came from my home, my Aboriginal relations and colleagues, from my own insistence to study this through my university coursework, and from supporters of Aboriginal peoples. Also, I did get support from the few caring non-Aboriginal faculty to centre my writing on Aboriginal issues and themes.*

*One of the things I always held on to dearly was the pride and confidence I always had in my Aboriginal Cree heritage and the guiding philosophies and practices. My parents (both of whom were/are bilingual Cree and English) taught us a lot about life, each in their own way. Many times over the years I would hear my father's teachings about not to forget who we were (our Cree heritage), not to undermine our heritage and to stand up to threats against it. He told me that we would be confronted with many different experiences that had to do with our cultural and racial heritage. He prepared me about the fact that our mixed heritage would be called in question both by the 'White' and 'Indian' world. He reminded us that we were Cree, to stand up for this and that was what was important but at the same time that we should not denigrate our white heritage - not that we could ever be accepted here. My father passed away in 1993, yet I still remember his words and the Aboriginal knowings and processes he passed on that continues to comfort and sustain me throughout my career. What he taught me was to 'assert our knowings and processes' that came from our heritage!*

*My mother taught/teaches me some of the same things my father did and other values too. She used to (still does!) tell us stories about Wesakeechak, a Cree trickster transformative character who was always doing silly, oppositional or serious things to teach lessons (Ermine, 1995; Highway, 1998). I remember the many times when we siblings vied to sit against her knees while she told stories and combed and braided our hair at night. My mother was/still is a hard-working woman with a strong*

*sense of who she is through her expression of how she taught us to live by example. Her strength, confidence, generosity of spirit and self, humorous yet serious-about-life-attitude comes through in the kind of work she has done and still does. She has done her share of procuring foods from the land, and preparing and preserving them. She was responsible for our home and keeping us children cared for and learning to become responsible. She fed, clothed, cleaned us and made sure we went to school. Still a skilled seamstress and craftswoman with her traditional work, she is in demand through word of mouth from friends and relatives who keep her busy making traditional foot wear and clothing.*

*I am a single parent of a 15 year old daughter and I am very aware of the dangers related to cultural and language disconnection's and disruptions. My daughter is aware of our values and traditions and when we can we work with these in our lives. I worry that I am not able to pass on cultural and linguistic proficiencies of what I learned as a child because our living circumstances differ so much...I was raised in the Cree context "bushes", she was/is raised in diverse urban environments. What I can teach her is the more diverse perspectives of Aboriginal peoples and ensure that she has the values if not the language. I have taught her many words in my Cree language but not to the point where we can converse since my own ability to speak Cree is rusty due to lack of context and use of the language. I find this interesting since Cree is my first language and it is a reminder of how colonial my schooling was. I teach my daughter what I can and hope that she will also find her own way in this world and continue to value her heritage.*

*When I entered the workforce and developed my career I was always bewildered by how many of my non-Aboriginal colleagues reminded me of my difference: They were several generations' settlers and new immigrants. Upon reflection, I wonder how they had the audacity to be so certain and blunt about their comments based on mis-information? Furthermore, there was no adherence to any sort of etiquette or respect for an individual's space! I even had strangers come up to me (who have obviously assumed that I was Native) and grilled me about silly questions related to "Native issues" and/or my 'Aboriginality' as if they had the right to do so. Whenever I demonstrated that I was not going to go along with their line of questioning, they appeared to be offended. To them, I was this "Native person who had made it" and therefore, I was an oddity. Somehow there was this feeling that I owed my achievements to 'whites' because of where I was and therefore I should be answering their questions. It is important to note that I had/have no problem with the identification of being Aboriginal. Rather, I*

*took issue with their 'generalizing' and offending display of prejudiced, stereotyped and racist portrayal, and negative attitudes and behaviours toward Aboriginal peoples. I was always appalled by comments that implied I was held responsible for my whole "race" (McIntosh, 1990). Consequently, I could never understand the expectations many of my colleagues placed on me to be everything to my people and others, whether or not I had the cultural, spiritual, political, social, personal, traditional knowledge, abilities or educational qualifications. In other words, I was the "expert". When comments referred to the social ills affecting our community, I was confronted with different kinds of comments, one common one was "well, you are not like 'them'" in reference to my relatives. I wondered exactly what was behind these comments? Of course, over the years I came to understand the ignorant and colonialist attitudes behind them. I found myself in positions of educating "whites" about us. Also, I was always surprised by the attitude by many other non-Aboriginal professionals that because "I made it" Surely, I must face no more racism, poverty, oppression etc. Yet, in spite the foregoing points, I have worked all of my adult life where my work contributed to the wellbeing of my people for over 30 years.*

*Since 1972, I have worked in a number of positions where I was employed as an employment counsellor, a small group's trainer, an administrator, a university professor and an educational consultant. The majority of these positions included service to people where the primary audience was Aboriginal Peoples. When I was a student, many of my research papers focused on Aboriginal histories, perspectives, experiences, and issues, sometimes to the chagrin of my teachers. Additionally, much of my teaching and service expertise focused on critical perspectives, cross-cultural education, antiracism and multicultural education, Aboriginal education, equity and human rights advocacy committees and groups, and understanding and improving Aboriginal student experiences in higher education.*

*I lived in Winnipeg, Manitoba from 1977 to 1998 but made numerous visits home. I went to Winnipeg to attend university. I now live in Toronto since 1998 when I came to take up a position in Aboriginal education at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education where I am also finishing my doctor of education degree. I intended to return to the North when I completed my first degree but I got hooked on learning and education, and felt that with a strong "formal" educational background in higher education I could do a lot more to serve my people through education. I was mindful that it was through the university (I since read about many other Aboriginal colleagues/scholars who experienced the same process of reclaiming voice) that I was able to assert, explore my*

*Aboriginality more so than in other settings. I stayed, continued my studies in education and obtained a Master's of Education degree in 1985. Of course, this is aside from the fact that the education I was receiving was very Western and mainstream, however there were courses I took that helped me to clarify issues of equity, racism, sexism and of Aboriginal issues and needs and aspirations.*

*In 1985, I conducted a master's of education thesis project at an access program called in Winnipeg inner city teacher education program where 50% of the students were of Aboriginal descent. The thesis project was a four-month pilot-counselling program for students. This is where I met a number of Aboriginal students that later became teachers' in Inner City schools. I continued my professional involvement with the Aboriginal teachers: many of whom became my friends and colleagues in the advocacy and advancement of culturally relevant, quality and equity education for Aboriginal Peoples, <u>for and by</u> Aboriginal Peoples.*

*As mentioned earlier, I became a member of the ATC in 1992 where I became much more aware of the day to day issues faced by the educators, as well as understanding and appreciating our needs and aspirations. I have served alongside many other Aboriginal educators in many endeavours related to culturally relevant Aboriginal education. I learned about the historic processes of colonization imposed upon Indigenous peoples throughout the world, and how the values of our contributions were not acknowledged. I became more resolved to work from decolonizing and Aboriginal affirming knowings and processes.*

*Finally, over the years, I observed the tensions of many of my non-Aboriginal colleagues' dilemmas about "how to approach" Aboriginal People and somehow the expectation that I could in some way help them ease their awkwardness was prevalent. This kind of expectation has happened many times in my interactions within mainstream systems and its people, policies and practices. I have tried to do what I could be bridge between mainstream and Aboriginal worlds if need be or to build in Aboriginal spaces with our knowings and processes if need be. Ekosi (that's the way) That is all for now.*

That is a little piece of ***Ni t'atchimowin*** (my story). ***Ki nunaskomitin***, (I thank you) for listening. When I reflected back on my story, I think about the many 'teachings' that I gained. I think about the way I think about the world, about relationships, about my work, about my life and about my values. I am so

aware that I work from my values as a Cree woman and trying to work in academia has been both an exhilarating and challenging process for me. Like Graveline, (2000) and Couture (2000) I understood the power in mainstream values that infiltrated the educational institutions and I understood my own struggles to resist assimilation/colonization and reconstruct an 'Aboriginal Space' that I could work with.

Therefore, in writing up this thesis, like Calliou (2001), Hermes (1998), and Smith (1999) I am fully aware of the western-centric demands that are placed on us as "academic researchers". In spite of this, I attempt to process my thesis in the voice that I know and through the voices (Elders, parents, spirit ancestors, relatives) that guide me (Couture, 1991, 2000), albeit in English and in academic processes. So in writing up this thesis, I integrated a narrative, 'storying'[2] writing style with mainstream academic fusions of 'standards of writing' and literature references imbedded throughout the thesis (I do not write a separate literature review as I found that would fragment my thesis process). I did follow standards of procedures for writing up academic manuscripts. I also attempted to present my work in a way that can be read (heard) through 'listening' to and 'hearing' the Aboriginal values/voices that come through in this thesis. For example, the reader may feel that there is repetition in some areas where I felt that restating an idea, a situation, a premise was evident. However, this act was important to linking or restating certain pieces of this work.

'Repetition', 'retelling' of 'teachings', stories, ideas, and concepts is a powerful act that Elders and traditional teachers (Couture, 1991) use when they teach or tell stories because as I heard many Elders say over the years "listening to the same story over and over again helps one to hear it differently each time. Each time we hear the same story, we learn something else" (Elijah, 1998). In addition, I attempted to explain many aspects of Aboriginal 'knowings' (including the colloquial words/phrases) that emerged in this thesis and that seemed to take up more writing space than if I were to present my thesis in a third person writing style. Therefore, I contend that my 'situatedness' in this thesis adds to the understanding of the complexities that we have as Aboriginal educators living in "two worlds" (Battiste, 1995; Colorado, 1988; Couture, 1991, 2000; Graveline, 2000).

## 2.2 Connections to the Circle of Aboriginal Educators

Hampton (1993) noted there are complexities and role conflicts inherent in the positions held by Aboriginal professionals in mainstream institutions simply because they are Aboriginal. He related some of these roles as "The tension between bureaucratic and advocacy roles and the absolute necessity of mediating between Natives and non-Natives...a primary factor throughout [his] professional life" (p.263). I wondered: "Is it possible that the Aboriginal educators experienced the same roles and expectations, too?" My reflections

[2] I use the word 'storying' here because I made a literal translation from my Cree language to English. By doing this I have modified the meaning for story in Cree thinking processes: 'storying'

upon our experiences as Aboriginal educators revealed this was/is the case. I believed this understanding of this context and my position as researcher, enhanced my awareness, knowledge and sensitivity (Bishop, 1998; Creswell, 1994) not only to the challenges, and issues encountered by Aboriginal educators, but also to understanding their needs and aspirations. Furthermore, I argue that my experiences assisted me in working 'in a good way' (working from Aboriginal principles of respect, co-operation, openness, relationships, trust, honour, courage etc) with the informants of this study. My experiences may beg the question of whether the ATC members, as Aboriginal educators had similar experiences as those indicated by Hampton (1993). Some of the earlier experiences I observed implied this was the case and finally the results discussed later through their stories reflect these experiences as well.

In order to assure respectful connections with the ATC members, I used a research process (explained later in chapter 4) in this thesis to counter the constant suspicion that "mainstream researchers" rely on mainstream research paradigms that delve into the lives of Aboriginal Peoples who have not benefited from the research (Smith, 2000). I wanted to communicate the idea that I was working beyond mainstream approaches. I sought non-mainstream research paradigms that spoke to the processes I used to carry out my work. In a sense, I was an insider who could understand the tensions outlined by Smith. Also, Fontana & Frey (1994) suggested that the researcher must "find an insider, a

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becomes a process/act of story-telling. Cree is a verb-based language.

member of the group studied, willing to be an informant and to act as a guide and translator of cultural mores and, at times, jargon or language" (p.376). This may have placed me, as the researcher, in an ambiguous role, since I considered myself and the participants as "key informants" to this study. In this sense, I was/am both insider and outsider. Working this complexity through as part of the thesis analysis pointed to my important connection to the lives of the participants of this study.

Western-trained researchers noted that when conducting qualitative research it is important to understand the research context and role of investigators. They claimed that researchers needed to become aware of potential biases and assumptions inherent in the research process. For example, a researcher's personal values, assumptions and biases of qualitative research (Carspecken, 1996; Creswell, 1994; Krefting, 1991) can influence the "applicability, consistency, and neutrality of the study" (Marshall & Rossman p. 143). Although I doubt that neutrality can truly be achieved in any study. However, the suggestion that the researcher's background should be identified at the beginning of any qualitative study was a welcome one for me. One of the 'teachings' in Aboriginal knowings and processes when people become involved in a project or gatherings is the importance of self-awareness, self-reflection related to family and culture (Cajete, 1994; Graveline, 2000). It is important that people know where they are at so that when they start relating to a work/project/gathering then they will know where to start their work/relating.

Dei (1996) talks about this as recognizing 'entry points' into doing antiracism work. In sharing my story and making the connections to the circle of participants, I attempted to demonstrate this self-knowledge as an important piece to this thesis.

Researchers (Colorado, 1988; Creswell, 1994; Hampton, 1993, Seidman, 1991) also argued that it is important that investigators highlight the importance of the relational aspects of working with informants and the necessity of gaining all round access to the informants. Furthermore, for the sake of honouring Aboriginal and Indigenous ways of knowing, I needed to know that I would work in a way that would not violate traditional Aboriginal ways of working together.

I attempt herein to demonstrate that my contribution, as the investigator, was useful and positive. I had the ability to identify with the educators. I understood the circumstances (for example, the western – Aboriginal historic tensions (Couture, 2000; Graveline, 2000) around colonial impacts of control and self-determination, cultural aspirations etc) that researchers cautioned might compromise the integrity of research processes. In addition, I submit that my perceptions about the Aboriginal educators' experiences in the context of mainstream systems have certainly been shaped by my own experiences. My experiences encompass not only the personal understanding and meanings attached to these experiences but also the knowledge gained about these experiences through my personal and academic life.

Research on Aboriginal Peoples' experiences as professionals in educational settings is sparse to say the least. However, there is a growing body of research by Indigenous and Aboriginal scholars that indicate Aboriginal professionals negotiate mainstream institutions under tense relationships (Hampton, 1993) that point to classic "Indian-White" (Monture-Agnus, 1999) relationships. Couture highlighted this issue through his discussion on "Native Studies and the Academy" when he outlined the contrasting paradigms that can create tensions where "it is not easy to enunciate native understandings in Western language" (p.163). Also, issues related to self-determination, race, culture, spirituality, class, and relevant education are taken up under tense scrutiny of mainstream eyes (Battiste, 1998; Brant Castellano, 2000 et al; Graveline, 2000; Deloria, 1996; Hampton, 1993; Monture-Angus, 1999; Smith, 1999).

Historically, we Aboriginal Peoples have suffered injustices from oppressive and paternalistic policies of colonial governments, and oppressions (racism, sexism) that still dominates in our daily lives (Cajete, 1994; Burns, 2000; Deloria, 1996; Fitznor, 1998; Graveline, 1998; Smith, 1999; Solomon, 1990; Youngblood, 1995). Unfortunately, these injustices created social havoc and Aboriginal peoples "suffered as the quality of their lives deteriorated historically under the control of external governments and institutions" (Brant Castellano 2000, in Indigenous Knowledges in Global Context p.33). This social havoc materialised in the lives of many Aboriginal Peoples through high rates of

alcoholism, suicide, school leaving, violence, incarceration, among other things (Report of the Aboriginal Justice Inquiry of Manitoba, 1991; RCAP, 1996). To counter these issues we need the contribution of Aboriginal researchers and educators who understand the issues more deeply than do strangers (Battiste, 1998; Smith, 1999). Finally, it is imperative that Aboriginal scholars and educators take the leadership in developing Aboriginal education foundations (Cajete, 1994; Couture, 2000), philosophies and practices so that "The promise of education will be fulfilled" (Brant Castellano, 2000, p. xvii), a major responsibility indeed.

# CHAPTER 3

# OPENING THE CIRCLE: LEARNING TO 'SEE' THEMES IN OUR LIVES

## 3.1 Preparing for the Study

This research grew out of my work in the field of Adult and Aboriginal education and antiracism education (30 years), and my involvement with the members of the ATC (8 years). This actual duration of the research process was from 1994 to 1998, with the writing up of the findings from 1998 to 2002. While I was a member of the ATC, I 'saw', 'felt', and 'heard' and 'understood' their/our "lived experiences": issues and themes that were similar to observations I made over the span of my career in mainstream educational systems wherein "programs" with Aboriginal people in mind were developed. I was always mindful about the depth or lack thereof of Aboriginal knowings and processes that guided these programs, and of the pervasive power of bureaucratic mainstream policies. I was always critical of the "myth" that Aboriginal students in a program of study make it an Aboriginal focussed program. That alone does not make that program Aboriginal in knowings and processes (particularly when non-Aboriginal professionals may staff the program or when Aboriginal professionals are simply following western paradigms for programming). It could simply be another immersion into mainstream education/programming that only served to exclude/ignore/distort Aboriginal knowings and processes. Finally, I reflected upon the ways educators worked to create Aboriginal spaces in these

mainstream settings, through their work, to bring into that circle our usually excluded knowings. Consequently, I became interested in pursuing this study.

I acknowledge the potential complexities that emerge for us as Aboriginal people living in contemporary Canada: we "live" in two worlds. The issue here is that we although we may experience our identities as 'Aboriginal' (respective of our diversities of languages, cultures, regions, statuses etc) in differing degrees, the reality is we live in two worlds (Anderson, 2000; Battiste, 1998; Colorado, 1988; Graveline, 1998). Sometimes these worlds collide (Littlebear, 2000) and create "jagged worldviews" (p.84) that need re-sorting (Battiste, 1998)! The other problem I see here is that Canadian mainstream society is born out of Euro-colonial ideologies that implicates our Aboriginal communities and peoples in specific ways that continue to place us in inferior positions of power (Antone, 2000; Graveline, 2000; Monture-Agnus, 1999; Youngblood, 1995). The participants' voices spoke to this dilemma of having to live with mainstream demands of assimilation while attempting to resist them (Anderson, 2000) and celebrate our lives as distinct Aboriginal peoples (RCAP, 1996). My search to look for relevant research theories and methods was an experience of frustration, confusion and finally elation upon finding Aboriginal/Indigenous writings as foundational philosophies or 'teachings' to support/guide my research process. I struggled to attend to the demands of mainstream academic "demands and/or standards" without forsaking my heritage, knowings and processes. This of course points out the dilemma of living in two worlds.

### 3.2 Looking for Relevant Research Methodologies

I asked myself many questions as I was embarking on this thesis journey: Where do I start? What methodology can/do I use? Where do I look for information? Do I really have to rely on Western methodologies? I reflected upon both my research story-question and the initial western research theories I read about. I read many books on how to do qualitative research, I digested some and upchucked a lot because I realized that many of these theories just did not 'fit' with who I was/am, who my 'brothers and sisters' the participants were/are. I struggled to find those methodologies that seemed to at least be 'kind', 'gentle', 'trusting', 'inclusive', 'connecting', 'relational' and 'non-intrusive' among other principles. I knew that I was employing 'qualitative research' methodologies so I looked to some of these approaches and assessed them for a more gentle and inclusive approach, even though they were still western in focus and process. In my heart I wanted to be sure that whatever I was doing that I needed to reveal the ways that the locations/experiences of ATC participants are even more intricate because of the colonization processes our peoples lived under for the past few centuries (Brant Castellano, 2000; RCAP, 1996). I am aware of the values and expectations of being Aboriginal in our communities and the complications of being Aboriginal within mainstream settings. When I am in our communities for the most part I 'know' what to expect, I 'know' who my 'people' are, I 'know' relationships, I 'know' the tough issues, and I 'know' that I do not "have to" educate, I know who we are. I am accepted and there is a certain ease

that goes with that. (This is not to ignore nor excuse any of the colonial impacted social ills in our communities - I 'know' that these exist too). When we are in the mainstream world I never quite 'know' what to expect, I am never sure how people are going to view/accept/reject/assimilate me, I never know what or how much 'educating' I will have to do. Finally I looked to the literature in Aboriginal education/studies and found relevant pieces that spoke to the research process and dilemmas we encounter as Aboriginal researchers. In Chapter Four, I outline these in more detail.

### 3.3 Modifying to Make Relevant Research Processes

Because of foregoing concerns, I modified one approach that suggested that employing a description and assessment of a pilot study is critical to strengthen the "validity" of qualitative research Marshall & Rossman (1995). I thought that inviting people to become involved in a "pilot" study just to test out certain processes would not fly well with the ATC as a 'test' case. I valued and respected their work and I did not want to put any of them through a pilot/test case. Therefore, in lieu of a pilot study, I documented some initial observations. Marshall and Rossman suggested researchers can "illustrate the ability to manage qualitative research by describing initial observations" (43) that could "generate research questions" (43). Therefore, I reflected upon the experiences of the ATC members. I took notes and inventoried their experiences as a whole and carefully reflected what these meant, I was aware that possible 'stories'

were emerging. In addition, I edited a selection of conference proceedings from a 1995 conference sponsored by the Aboriginal Teachers' Circle and in this document many of the same needs and aspirations emerged through the contributions of the writers (Fitznor, 1997).

Therefore, when I reflected upon the observations that I made with respect to the ATC members' experiences I argued that the context of their/my/our work and experiences was sufficient to understand the background and develop the pieces to this study. Also, the observations I made were not all that surprising since I have heard, felt and seen them repeated in many ways throughout my professional careers. In addition, I contend that some, most, or all of these observations have been felt by most of my colleagues (not only ATC) who are Aboriginal and have demonstrated a commitment to working from Aboriginal knowings and processes (Antone, 2000; Bishop, 1998; Brant Castellano, 2000; Couture, 2000; Graveline, 2000; Hampton, 1993).

One of the 'principles/values in Aboriginal thinking' is respecting that place where people are with their spiritual, cultural, linguistic, physical, psychological, and emotional development. Our knowings are not always apparent to us. Therefore, I suggest that those individuals who have not necessarily centred their work in Aboriginal perspectives but self-identified as "Aboriginal" are still confronted with issues related to prejudices, stereotyping and racism simply based on skin colour or cultural affiliation! There were occasions for these types of experiences to be discussed at the ATC meetings. Whenever the situation

demanded an advocacy response, the ATC members supported their 'brothers and sisters' in struggles whether or not they were active members of the organization. Thus, in spite of these observations, I submit that not all 'Aboriginal individuals' necessarily want to, nor will, participate in an Aboriginal education movement that deliberately counters colonizing processes while rekindling Aboriginal peoples' contents, perspectives, knowings, philosophies and processes through their careers in educational settings. They may simply want to teach what the curriculum has outlined. This was difficult to ascertain since I was not able to access all the members of the ATC. So I suggest that those who tended to be most active participants of the organization would likely share the desire to work from Aboriginal knowings and processes, as evidenced in the outcome of this study. Also, it would seem likely that those members who had been actively involved know about the ATC mission and objectives, which clearly support development and work from Aboriginal knowings and processes subject to our own limitations and potentials.

## 3.4 Emergent Themes in the Lives of the ATC Members: Pieces of the Circle

When I first listed my observations on the experiences and backgrounds of the ATC members, I came up with twenty items. I then analysed these items and sorted them into five main themes/categories to guide me in this research process. These were (1) educator profiles, (2) career paths - barriers or

opportunities, (3) issues of differences due to racial and cultural background, (4) developing and identifying with Aboriginality and Aboriginal knowings and processes in education, and (5) asserting and contributing Aboriginal knowings and processes in education. I discuss each of these observations briefly:

### 3.4.1 Educator Profiles and Backgrounds

Diversity is one of the principles of Aboriginal knowings and processes (Brant Castellano, 2000; Fitznor, 1998; Graveline, 2000; RCAP, 1996). The ATC reflected diversity in cultural, linguistic, status (Indian, Metis, non-Status Indian) classifications, ages, gender, urban-rural origins and locations. I was always conscious of the diversity of backgrounds that made up our differences even though we shared a common heritage and some common experiences. Some of us speak our first language; some of us understand the language but cannot speak it with fluency; still some of us do not understand nor speak our first language. Some of us have grown up in our respective Aboriginal communities, then went away to high school (including residential schools) and never returned other than periodic visits for funerals, celebrations, special gatherings and family obligations. Some ATC members have grown up away from the communities of their peoples such as in urban settings.

The educators tended to enter their educational pursuits and careers later in life as opposed to the sequential leaving from high school and entering college or university like young adults. The ATC members included administrators,

classroom teachers, civil servants, education consultant and educators from university, college, and government sites. There were more females than males in the membership. Although, the ATC reflected status Indians and Metis categories Inuit people were known to become a member of the ATC at the time of this study. The group reflected the provincial Aboriginal cultural/linguistic distribution to some extent, primarily Ojibway, Cree, and Oji-Cree. Their combined list of accomplishments in teaching, community-work, and providing education consultations is quite impressive. Their accomplishments will be discussed further in chapter Five.

### 3.4.2 Career Paths, Barriers and Opportunities

Many ATC educators tended to work in locations where the majority of the student body is Aboriginal (e.g. in reserves, in Metis communities, in urban institutions where the Aboriginal students attend in large numbers). Based on my extensive experiences in the field, I suggest that the decision to work in these areas included a combination of the following factors. Many Aboriginal graduates expressed the desire to work and serve amongst their own people to counter racism and stereotyping and to advance Aboriginal knowings and processes. Access Programs in Manitoba and sponsoring First Nations' Councils have actively promoted graduates to return to their communities or to serve in areas of employment where the community is largely Aboriginal. Parents, Elders and community leaders have expressed their concerns (at public venues such as

conferences, meetings, and sharing circles) about their children's participation in the educational system. They fear that their children will forsake or have displaced their cultures and languages because education is so mainstream, students are in danger of losing touch with their identities (Brant Castellano, 2000; Smith, 2000). The pull, therefore, is for Aboriginal Peoples to serve and work within their communities, rural or urban. This concern has been coupled with the desire that Aboriginal students need to do well both in the "white world" and the "Aboriginal world" by being biculturally effective (Battiste, 1998; Brant Castellano, 2000; Colorado, 1988; Couture, 2000; Fitznor, 1998). Historically, Aboriginal Peoples have experienced disruptions of their identities (languages and cultures) due to a European focused and imposed education system that pays no heed to their history, nor to their social, political, cultural and spiritual traditions. It is understandable as Aboriginal leaders and parents; we would want our children "close to home".

A number of the ATC members were periodically called upon to make presentations or to conduct workshops for inservice teachers and pre-service teachers, university classrooms, and at conferences about Aboriginal education, spiritual/cultural awareness and teachings, teacher practice and issues affecting Aboriginal students. Some have contributed writing pieces reflecting their work in local newsletters, while others have contributed to research publications.

Although many of the ATC members have at one time or another expressed their desire to pursue graduate work, only a few have followed

through. At the writing of this study, I estimated that at least 6 participants either have or are in the process of completing either a Post Baccalaureate or Masters degree in education. I was aware that few other members have indicated their interest to pursue graduate studies though they have not been able to follow through. Some ATC members stated their reason for not pursuing graduate school was the lack of cultural relevance in graduate education and lack of financial supports. It is interesting to note that this idea of lack of cultural relevance became more apparent to them after they graduated from their degrees and became teachers. I made presentations at ATC meetings and a conference in hopes of stimulating further interest in graduate studies. I submit that pursuing ongoing education is important for our peoples because, ironically, it is education that is improving our opportunities for asserting Aboriginal Perspectives (Brant Castellano, 2000; Battiste, 1998; Cajete, 1994; Hampton, 1993).

Furthermore, Aboriginal teachers expressed their concerns to being the last hired thus the constant concern of being the "first fired". It was difficult path for the educators to get hired once they graduated because many mainstream administrators viewed their degrees as second class because they graduated from Access Programs. So in order to get "to get into the system" some took on non-classroom education positions. Finally, the ATC members have at various times written position briefs, letters of concern and recommendations to

educational institutions as they related to equity representation of Aboriginal teachers or lobbying for job security for Aboriginal teachers.

### 3.4.3 Issues Around Racial and Cultural Backgrounds

Some tensions that emerged between mainstream education (educators and the system) and the needs and aspirations of Aboriginal students, parents, and teachers were related to racial and cultural differences within the mainstream context of a hierarchical and power relations (Graveline, 2000; McLaren, 1994). These tensions emerged during the member's tenure as a student in university or as they experienced their careers and they were dealt with in a number of ways, some of which were helpful to the situation and others not. Some Aboriginal educators faced this knowledge and experience of "difference" on a daily basis. It seemed that if s/he was light skinned and not vocal about his/her Aboriginal heritage then no overt tensions occurred but if s/he was vocal about his/her Aboriginal heritage then tensions were more likely to occur. If the educator was dark skinned with stereotyped physical features that hinted at misconceived notions of "Aboriginality", then more negative experiences were encountered. These were issues the educators spoke about in various meetings and sharing sessions, and reflective of my experiences with Aboriginal colleagues.

Aboriginal teachers who worked in mainly white settings (i.e. the only "Aboriginal", or one of two, among the staff) tended to report feelings of

isolation and viewed ATC as a support system. Racial and cultural stereotyping, and prejudice in the classroom, in text, in staff rooms, etc., are common experiences for many of the teachers. Therefore, the ATC became a support system for hearing and dealing with issues, understanding and developing Aboriginal perspectives and for making sense of these experiences.

### 3.4.4 Identity Development and Aboriginal Perspectives in Education

One of the constant topics that seemed to emerge in many conversations, meetings, conferences was that of understanding our multiple Aboriginal identities (race, culture, language, political/social affiliation/disconnection, family affiliation/disconnection etc). We questioned "status Indian" classifications and discussed how these played out in our lives and in the lives of the students in mainstream schools. Some of the educators did not always feel connected to their culture although they self-identified with their Aboriginal heritage. Sometimes these issues would surface through their university and career experiences when people asked questions about their identity. Some of the members talked about the little they knew about their heritage and their desire to learn more. Being in situations where the discussions centred on Aboriginal knowings and processes sparked their interest to explore further.

Some discussions centred on what a colleague experienced by being constantly 'singled out' and how it forced coming to terms with connections or

disconnection to his/her Aboriginal heritage. The issues around identity confusion that surfaced from this exploration sometimes created an emotional and psychological roller coaster. The process of understanding our multiple identities and responsibilities in Aboriginal education is demanding to say the least. When particular attention is strongly focused on being "Aboriginal" in the educational system that can be problematic for the educator in that it poses undue stress. The issue was not that the educators did not wish to focus attention on their heritage, it was the expectations placed on them that puzzled them. Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Colleagues, parents and students made demands on them just <u>because</u> they are Aboriginal (Hampton, 1994), therefore, they have a "responsibility" to their heritage <u>and</u> to continue to serve their communities.

Teachers involved with the ATC had various levels of understanding about and experiences with their own Aboriginal heritage. For example, some members had a strong connection to and immersion in their cultural, linguistic, and spiritual traditions. This connection was evident in their advocacy roles, professional practices and personal lifestyles. While others struggled with denial-of-heritage issues they are in the process of strengthening their Aboriginal connections. So many of us were schooled in mainstream thought and in varying degrees influenced by Christian traditions that are prevalent in our communities. In spite of this process, many of us still speak our languages and maintain a connection to Aboriginal (i.e. Cree, Ojibway etc) lifestyles. Some ATC members had a limited understanding of these traditions but have experience with and a

strong understanding of the personal, social and political struggles of Aboriginal peoples. Yet, others had little or no opportunities to become involved with Aboriginal perspectives and philosophies because they have been displaced from their cultural, linguistic, spiritual, social and political traditions, they do not know where to start. There is also that experience of Aboriginal people who choose not to self-identify for various reasons and therefore they do not become involved in any activity that brings attention to themselves as Aboriginal peoples.

Some ATC members were involved in guiding, developing and co-ordination, and supporting Aboriginal education initiatives sponsored by the University of Manitoba. In addition, there were a few members who were involved with going to ceremonies and teaching circles to further their understanding.

### 3.4.5 Asserting Aboriginal Education (Knowings and Processes)

Aboriginal teachers who were active members in the ATC tended to be active in pursuing culturally appropriate curriculum in their workplace. They encountered different degrees of acceptance or resistance and opposition to their work and their approaches depending on the school and the environment. In some cases, teachers worked at promoting Aboriginal cultural perspectives through immersion in language teaching or traditional and spiritual teachings. Others designed their curriculum by drawing from Aboriginal content, history, cultures, and traditions or teaching about Aboriginal self-determination and

human rights issues in the classroom. There were instances where the focus of Aboriginal education was a welcome difference to mainstream curriculum. Aboriginal educators who had a strong interest in and background in Aboriginal knowings and processes tended to become involved in professional development activities that were focused on Aboriginal philosophies and practices whether it was through university classes, professional development or working with Elders and traditional teachers.

They sought out those activities to develop their leadership and teacher effectiveness skills in preparation for administrative positions that responded to the demand for Aboriginal professionals at all levels of the educational system. The ATC members have worked in co-operation with the WSD#1 personnel to ensure that professional development and leadership programs were geared for the Aboriginal teacher. Some of the members have served on committees within the division that linked teachers to inservice opportunities. Some educators have participated in providing leadership seminars and talks related to Aboriginal education at many inservice seminars and other related sessions.

Finally, another way that ATC members asserted Aboriginal ways is ensuring that they conducted their meetings by relying on Aboriginal ways. For example, most meetings or gatherings opened with a sharing circle (an extension discussion of sharing circles can be found in chapter 4.4.5). Each person in attendance of the sharing circle had the opportunity to voice a greeting, a concern, an opinion, an experience or whatever was on her/his mind as a way of

centering on the task at hand. Many of these sharing circles also opened with a smudge and a thanksgiving acknowledgement for the many gifts we receive for our physical, spiritual, mental and emotional wellbeing. The 'act of smudging' is an Aboriginal tradition used in many Aboriginal cultural immersion gatherings in Winnipeg. After the sharing circle was done, 'business' would then take place.

## 3.5 Integrating the Beginning Themes into the Research Process

I then had the task of building on these initial observations (Marshall and Rossman, 1995), themes and issues in a way that would guide my data collection. The emergent themes provided a rich background that set the context for this study wherein these observations were used as a guide to develop "questions" to obtain biographical and demographic information, and as a framework for thinking through the 'story' to follow up in the sharing circles and personal interviews. (I provide more information about the biographical questionnaire in chapter four.)

### 3.5.1 Purpose of the Study

I appreciated the value of the ATC members' interest, commitment and capacity to advance Aboriginal education through their respective work sites and through the ATC. I appreciated the kind of relationships and hard work that thrived within this small organization and the ways the members worked to 'get the job done'. The leaders reached out and called to their members: they met,

talked, laughed and worked. I enjoyed my participation with them and I valued the fact that it provided a rich data base from which to continue my thesis journey. I had the support of the ATC members that I had met, and in particular, the 1994 ATC Chair put in writing her support of my research plan.

Also, I was mindful that I wanted to find a way to work from paradigms that were grounded in ways that reflected our traditions, perspectives, philosophies, histories, and issues that I could build into this research process. As I struggled through resisting western paradigms and methods of research processes, I realized that there were ways of doing research that honoured the integrity of our Indigenous ways of knowing. This information was 'right under my nose' so to speak, I just did not 'see' it until I had conversations with colleagues that clarified the issues for me. These points become evident in this thesis.

Consequently, the emerging themes and issues in the lives of the ATC members guided me to follow and understand their professional experiences as Aboriginal Educators in a more systematic way as they worked within Mainstream educational institutions. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to engage ATC members in this study to provide a descriptive base for their stories and utilise the data for an analysis of the meanings attached to their experiences within the context of Aboriginal knowings and processes.

### 3.5.2 Limitations

The group under study reflected a purposeful sample in that only a small portion of Aboriginal educators had an opportunity to participate in this study. Respectfully, it is prudent to state that this study will not be generalized to all areas where there are Aboriginal Peoples working in mainstream institutions. It is specific to the Aboriginal Teachers' Circle, an organization that is over 10 years old and one that has struggled to maintain momentum from year to year depending on its members for ongoing service and volunteerism to sustain the goals and objectives of ATC. The methods used to recruit members may also be seen through the lens of Western researcher-eyes as a weakness in that recruitment was done not through usual westernized "formal" approaches. For example, the ATC membership list is maintained through the informal networking of colleagues, friendships, word of mouth, invitations, and attendance at events where educators may be asked to sign up. However, I submit that these informal networking communication patterns are strengths because they are culturally significant ways of communication patterns that worked for the organization. When circumstances warranted any form of political, cultural, social or educational action the educators and often their community colleagues were mobilized through Aboriginal communications' networks to help out, work, lobby and to contribute. The consistent attendance at the events affirmed these informal patterns of networking worked!

Any interpretations I made from the participants' responses to the survey questionnaire, circle sessions, and the one-on-one interviews may be subject to other interpretations. I recognized and acknowledged that any interpretations are filtered through my frame of reference as evident in this thesis.

### 3.5.3 Delimitations

This study did not search beyond the membership of the Aboriginal Teachers' Circle. I am aware that other Aboriginal people work as teachers, professors, instructors, educational consultants, etc., in Winnipeg schools, community colleges, universities, and other educational organizations or agencies (government or non-profit). This study confined itself to collecting data from members of the Aboriginal Teachers' Circle.

### 3.5.4 Research question(s): Framing the "Questions" in Storytelling

Finally, when I thought about the kinds of questions I "should be asking" or needed to ask to obtain the data for this research I looked to the emergent issues and themes were prevalent in the lives of the ATC members. The emerging themes and issues became the guide for considering my research questions/purpose and helped me define the rest of this research journey. For example, based on the emerging themes and issues, I drafted up a questionnaire to get a set of data from the participants that reflected their biographical backgrounds, participation in Aboriginal education, and overall career

accomplishments. When I brought the participants together in the sharing circles, I included the information gathered from the biographical questionnaire and further presented a "story context" of the themes and issues and asked the participants to frame their sharing within this context. Although I asked direct questions in the questionnaire I felt that asking the same in the sharing circles was not appropriate. Therefore, rather than come up with specific questions that might limit participants' voices in the sharing circles and personal interviews, I asked the participants to tell their story as they saw/felt comfortable with sharing framed against the story/information I told/provided about the emerging themes and issues. In addition, I reminded them about the purpose of this study.

An important point to make here is that I was very aware of the point of asking "research questions" but I was always cautious about how asking direct questions might place the participants at place of discomfort, especially in a circle setting. Asking such direct questions and expecting direct answers is culturally inappropriate to the way I was raised in my Cree surroundings and cultural nuances. I knew it was the same for many of the participants.

# CHAPTER 4

# ABORIGINAL/INDIGENOUS METHODOLOGIES ENTER THE CIRCLE

## 4.1 Introduction

When I set out to conduct this study, I was cautious about the kind of research paradigms I might employ. As an educator who was/is suspicious of mainstream research processes concerning Aboriginal Peoples, I wanted to develop a research plan that was ethical and respectful to ATC members and Aboriginal peoples. I wanted to work with frameworks that honoured our knowings, self-determination, and ways of doing/being in the world. In doing so that does not mean that the 'Western world' is/can be excluded - it cannot be, we live within it. Like the Aboriginal and Indigenous researchers here imply, I am suggesting that the processes that originate from Western spaces have been problematic for/and disruptive to Aboriginal peoples' lives (Cole, 2000; Graveline, 2000; Hermes, 1996; Smith, 1990). Aboriginal and Indigenous researchers cannot totally escape from Western ways because we are using the English language to do our work and I am well aware that language has a great impact on cultural expressions. Couture (2000) discusses in great length the dilemmas of and demands placed on Aboriginal teachers and educators who work with Aboriginal studies in mainstream institutions.

It is important to note that I adapted qualitative methodologies (pilot study – own observations; questionnaire that was grounded in Aboriginal context; group interview – sharing circles; interviews – conversations) that were

relevant to this group. Upon thinking about what kinds of frameworks I could continue to work with in this research and after some thoughtful conversations with colleagues in the field, I found that there were Aboriginal scholars who were problematizing western mainstream ways of doing research while rekindling and asserting Aboriginal/Indigenous paradigms. It was at this stage that I integrated more of their work into writing up this thesis, particularly this body of works supported what I was already doing. My ways of working with the ATC participants was framed by Aboriginal knowings and processes. I just needed to articulate the underlying philosophies with support from the literature in the field.

### 4.2 Aboriginal/Indigenous Voices Defining Research

As a researcher, who is Indigenous and striving to articulate an Aboriginal research agenda (Smith, 2000), I believe that it is timely that we work at both decolonizing mainstream educational impacts and asserting aspects of our knowings and processes (Bishop, 1998; Cole, 2000; Colorado, 1988; Couture, 2000; Graveline, 1999; Hampton, 1993; Hart, 1996; Marker, 1998; Smith 1999). This is particularly critical in research that involves us as Aboriginal Peoples whose ways of life, philosophies, politics, social identities, cultures, languages, and psyches have been rung through the "colonizer" mill. Clearly, we are attempting to reclaim and rekindle what was almost lost through a process that speaks to "self-determination, decolonization and social justice" (Smith, 2000, p.4).

Hence, my choice to draw from researchers whose methodologies reflected Aboriginal knowings and processes to make sense of the data from this study. Furthermore, I honour and appreciate the fact that there are now many more Indigenous and Aboriginal researchers who dare to challenge/problematize Western research dominance while asserting our knowledges and ways in research processes. Here I discuss and take into account the suggested frameworks of four scholars who write/research to honour Indigenous/Aboriginal knowings and processes. There are many more (Anderson, 2000; Antone, 2000; Cajete, 1994; Hampton 1993; Hermes, 1998; Smith, 1998 among others), but the researchers' whose works I highlight here, in particular, brought 'good medicine' to what I needed to break free from feeling obliged to frame only Western researcher paradigms for my work. These scholars demonstrated leadership about how research is thought about and conducted for, and by, Aboriginal/Indigenous peoples. This was a relief for me as an Aboriginal scholar conducting this piece of research because I struggled with mismatched Western ways of taking up research on Aboriginal peoples. I did not want to repeat processes that might dishonour our relations.

For example, Colorado (1988) talks about how she relied on traditional knowings and teachings to conduct her research. She discussed some of the traditional Aboriginal protocols she used in working with traditional Elders and Aboriginal people that she interviewed while she incorporated Western forms of interviewing. When she wrote up her work, she combined the narrative/orality of

storytelling and traditional philosophies to talk about her research. She outlined "four dynamics [that] drive our methodology" (p. 5), which she states, are feelings, history as a tool, prayer and relations. She described the ways that she worked these dynamics with Western perspectives into her research. In addition, at that time she felt that an incorporation of the two worldviews of conducting research was the way to bridge Western and Indian science. Like Colorado, I employed the 'dynamics' of which she spoke to drive my methodology by focussing on the expressed emotions and feelings of the participants, considering historical factors (personal and group), and including thanksgiving 'prayer' acknowledgements and relationships.

Cole (2000) sets his thesis out in a flow of orality: he uses a poetic talk/language through a continuous flow of thoughts, words, stories and knowings. He draws from a canoe journey metaphor as a 'teaching' that both troubles Western ways of doing research while honouring First Peoples and Indigenous knowings. It was time to sit and read/listen and sit and read/listen again this poetic piece just like the many times I could sit hours and listen to the same teachings told by different teachers or the same teacher in different times. Just like traditional oral spaces, we can learn something everytime we sit/read/listen. His interviews/conversations were written in a way that moves the reader to use our minds and hearts to listen and learn to read between the lines, or as Elder teachings have expressed 'take what you need as you listen to what is said'. In other instances he is obvious about the oppressions and colonial

impacts visited upon our peoples. I am mindful that some of the points I make in this thesis as well as the participants' stories have a repetition to what is being said from different storytellers, but we need that kind of re-telling to 'learn' to read differently from mainstream ways. Also, we learn to listen and read between the lines of what is said; as well there were some obvious negative points that are made about their experiences and the hope that is expressed from participants' assertions of Aboriginal knowings and processes.

Graveline (1998) enacted her research from a critical opposition stance toward Western colonialist renderings of research while she brought forth the ancient symbols of circle knowings and teachings as methodology in her work. She drew from critical and qualitative theorists who problematize Western "authorities" in research that box us into certain ways to explain our research. She also used orality through, a "poetic narrative" storytelling and poetic expressions of Aboriginal knowings and stories. In this way, I too have tried to employ a method where the participants' stories or narratives are the keys to this research. I relied on their emerging themes and issues (stories) to build the narrative of this research in a way that would tell their ongoing stories of despair and hope. In so doing, I employed Aboriginal knowings and processes in the collection of my data through immersion of Aboriginal knowings and processes I discuss later in this chapter.

Bishop (1998) wrote an encouraging piece of work about 'freeing ourselves' from the western paradigms of Western researcher-authority of

legitimizing what constitutes knowledge and research. He discussed how out of a "discontent with traditional research and its disruption of Maori life, an Indigenous approach to research has emerged in New Zealand " (p.201). This thought rang so true for me because our lives have also experienced major disruptions to our cultures, languages, knowings, stories, and histories. I understood what Bishop was talking about in feeling compelled to follow what is expected of us as 'academics' in mainstream institutions. Breaking free from feeling obliged to stay with mainstream research paradigms was indeed freeing.

It is time: I felt as if these researchers were "Giving voice to our Ancestors" (Kirkness, 1992) through their work of orality/storytelling of their work and of the people that co-participated in their research. They showed us that our 'teachings' today must include both a decolonizing (where we critique and stand up against colonialism) and Aboriginalizing/Indigen-izing of knowings and processes (rekindling and asserting our ways). Therefore, they demonstrated their courage to assert their research that reflects our histories, our stories, our rendering of life of what needs to happen for our people to do more than just survive: to live and think seven generations into the future (Brant Castellano, 2000). Just as Verna Kirkness, a valued Cree scholar (Associate Professor Emerita, UBC) who led the way for many of us Aboriginal educators, stated:

> They told me to tell you the time is now.
> They want you to know how they feel.
> So listen carefully, look toward the sun.
> The Elders are watching....

Therefore, it is time to assert our responsibilities as told in many prophecies of our Elders. Our Elders watch us and they wait for more of us to pick up 'our bundles', that is, carry out our work immersed in Aboriginal knowings and processes. Kirkness continued her voicing of what needs to happen:

> We must work with our minds and our hearts in giving voice to our ancestors. With their guidance we are seeking ways to make ourselves healthy....We are seeking ways to make our families strong again, and we are seeking to find out who are through our languages, and we are seeking an education that is based on our traditions, our values and our customs" (p.148).

To her words I add, we must follow the lead of Aboriginal and Indigenous scholars who dared to trouble Western paradigms and assert ours. This is what I am also attempting here. Therefore, the methodological approach used in this research is based on the need to give Aboriginal knowings and processes a voice by employing methodological frameworks that are mindful of our knowings. Therefore, I made prominent Aboriginal knowings and processes in this research as I discuss in the next section of this chapter.

### 4. 3 Immersing Aboriginal Knowings and Practices

Here I highlight in bold print the various Aboriginal knowings and processes I utilized in this research journey. I offer a caution to the reader that while diversity of cultures, languages, histories is the norm for us as Aboriginal peoples there are some common elements that are dictated by geographic and cultural boundaries. Many ways of what I have come to know as distinctly

Aboriginal and 'Cree' in some instances are those teachings I gained from my family, culture and Aboriginal traditional teachers. This is what follows here. The participants are **Aboriginal educators** who are members of a **grass-roots** organization that had clear **goals of Aboriginal self-determination and control** centred in Aboriginal knowings and processes. As I posited earlier, being Aboriginal itself does not mean that we necessarily work from Aboriginal self-determination and knowings. When Aboriginal teachers became members of the ATC, inevitably they came to understand and support the goals of the organization judging from their ongoing participation in the group and the various activities. **Relationships** were important aspects of working together nurtured by **friendships, encouraging words**, and **reciprocal ways of relating**. We enjoyed **gatherings** and meetings that reflected **friendships, food, cultural/spiritual ceremonies**, and **conversations about our future** and our **children**. We **laughed** and shared **stories**: we wove in and out of our stories our perceptions of and experiences with the mainstream society, and our desire for a culturally and spiritually relevant quality world for Aboriginal children.

When I developed the biographical survey/questionnaire, I **centred the questions and comments within Aboriginal knowings and processes** that included **the context of our colonial relationships** with mainstream society that needed **decolonizing processes**. I wanted to set the context of our reality in that we live as Aboriginal peoples but we also live in a mainstream society that is not always supportive to our ways, our histories, our needs and aspirations.

Therefore, when I felt it was necessary I provided some background information to set the context for the question. I did this to avoid the feelings of overwhelm and inadequacies that people might experience simply by looking at such an extensive questionnaire. Not all ATC members necessarily 'knew' about the various atrocities visited upon Aboriginal peoples in the educational system. I attempted to present the information in a way that was **respectful but challenging**. I was impressed with the depth of the responses to the questionnaire from those whose completed this piece.

Working with **talking/sharing circles** was an extension of working in a way that was the 'norm' for the ATC. I **prepared and served food** that was consumed before we worked in the sharing circles and interviews (this seemed reasonable considering that the sharing circles were held from 6:00 to 9:30 in the evening). I offered a **tobacco bundle** to each participant as an acknowledgement of appreciating her/his participation and as a way of **giving thanks** for the knowledge (considered '**good medicine**' in Aboriginal vernacular talk) they provided. During the sharing circles and personal interviews there was a lot of **empathetic mutual understanding** of issues and themes and **humour** that emerged in the process of participants' **storytelling**. I did not interfere (**non-interference** of what needed to be shared) with the direction of the sharing circle or interview themes once they got started – **participants spoke from their own knowings**. I attempted to frame my work in a way that is **decolonizing and Aboriginalizing** – challenging western modes of research

while **asserting our knowings and processes**. I drew from literature in the field that highlighted **Aboriginal scholars grounded in Aboriginal and Indigenous knowings.**

Here I explain the reason for drawing from sharing circles (also known as 'talking, teaching or healing circles depending on the goals of the circle facilitators) and other Aboriginal symbols as examples of Aboriginal traditions and provide a rationale for using them in this research process. In addition to the survey questionnaire and the personal interviews, the circle work produced a major piece of data for this thesis. In addition, by drawing from the model of sharing circles, I contribute to the body of knowledge that is being developed to focus research processes on and by Aboriginal researchers. I found little research that spoke of sharing circles as research methodology, however it is in use in many Aboriginal adult education programs. Furthermore, Graveline (1998) followed a similar process of drawing from **Medicine Wheel symbols** to enact her teaching wherein she also employed a "talking circle as pedagogy" (p.136), an excerpt of a poem she wrote is reflective of the sharing circles I put into use in this research:

In Talking Circle.... In "circle time"
We open our Hearts
Speak what we know to be True
Share what we Care deeply about
As Honestly as we can...as Respectfully as we are able.
As we are able to enter into another's experience through their Words.
A doorway to self-examination...a social context for a "personal" experience"

Another Aboriginal scholar, Hart (1996) discussed the value of drawing from the model of sharing circles for teaching, helping and supporting. It is a model that helps participants to 'see' and 'speak' about their experiences centred in their own knowings and processes. I have worked with sharing circles as a model for teaching, healing and personal growth for over 25 years. Using them as data gathering for my thesis was merely an extension of this model of Aboriginal education. Over the years of my immersion in education, the sharing circle model became more evident to me as an Aboriginal centred 'knowing and process'. I recognized too that this was evident as I began to critique western methods as inadequate for Aboriginal education. When the ATC members used this method in their meetings, I found that people tended to be active and willing to discuss the topic at hand in spite of the difficult and potential emotionally provoking nature of some of the topics. Morgan (1988) cautioned researchers to be aware of the emotions that can surface in focus groups as data gathering I kept in mind the same consideration for sharing circles.

Sharing circle models ensure that everyone gets to listen and take a turn at talking. Participants listen to each other and share information without offering their opinions, comment, and judgements on what others have shared before them. At the same time, people can be reminded to share information because others have made certain points that might evoke memories for others (Hart, 1996). It has been my experience that topics can change in circles depending on the dynamics in the group. However, I was fortunate and grateful that the

participants stayed focussed on the **research story/question** without prompts to stay focussed on the research question. I have heard **teachings** by Elders that say that the **Creator guides what needs to happen through our spirit ancestors**, particularly when we give ourselves up into this way of living. In the process of this thesis journey I have often felt that this was the case. I remember panicking inwardly when I started the sharing circles and wondered if we all would stay on task and I was delighted that we did. I understand that I possibly risk the accusation that I compromise "Western" academic integrity by making statements such as this, so be it.

My involvement as a member of the sharing circle, not merely as an observer, also contributed to the body of knowledge that emerged from this setting. As a measure of caution, I took my turn last in the circles so that what I communicated did not inadvertently influence what the participants said. Getting the ATC members to participate in sharing circles was not a difficult task since this was a norm established at ATC meetings. The usual concerns associated with focus groups, as research methods such as group dynamics (dominating the group and participation level) were not a problem with sharing circles because of the nature of the process. For example, when focus group have been used in studies, it assumes a free-for-all expression of voices from any part of the circle and some people may 'hog' air time (Fontana & Frey, 1994; Morgan, 1988) that might exclude the quieter people. The intent and format for sharing circles is different.

Hart (1996) wrote about **sharing circles as a healing, teaching and support model reflective of Aboriginal perspectives**: "The sharing circle has been used for many years by First Nations peoples as a format for communication, decision making, and support" (p.59). Although the notion of sharing circles is not evident in western research paradigms, it is nevertheless an important aspect of Aboriginal traditions when people gather for the purpose of learning, sharing, and discussing concerns and issues. Sharing circles embrace concepts like learning from one another, and learning from what is said, gaining information and knowledge to incorporate into one's life, honouring and respecting what is heard. Confidentiality is honoured, sharing the joy and pain of others is respected. Hart (1996) further stated that recognizing that what each person says is placed on an equal footing, as anyone else's (e.g. no one persons voice is more important than the other is). Also the willingness to share information about one's experiences that might promote personal wellbeing and the wellbeing of Aboriginal Peoples. This appears to be an illustration of the responsibility of 'service' principles that guide 'Indian Education' according to Hampton, (1993). Hart also noted that "The sharing circles can establish dignity and unity by following **the basic teachings of being holistic, in balance, connected, and in harmony.... Sharing circles are holistic** in that everyone can participate" (P. 69).

I present a process of how a sharing circle might be conducted as an important piece to understanding this research process. Therefore, although

there are regional and/or cultural differences (**'diversity' is an Aboriginal reality**), many common principles/practices include the following (A version of the following points can be found in a chapter titled "The Circle of Life: Affirming Aboriginal Philosophies in Everyday Living" Fitznor, 1998):

1. Everyone is **seated in a circle facing each other**, The topic at hand is placed, symbolically, at the centre of the circle (Hart, 1996). In this case, I presented in story form the intent of my thesis process that included my location/history and my research question.

2. A designated leader (could be elder, group leader, teacher, etc) **opens the circle** with a welcome, and explains the process for the circle, a **'thanksgiving'** invocation and **'smudging'** occurs where the **"smoke from burning sweetgrass"** (Hart, 1996, p. 68), is used in the circle. Other medicines can be used for the smudge such as **cedar, sage, maple tree** etc. In the case of this research process I was able to invite an **Elder/traditional teacher** to 'open' two sharing circles. Other members and myself opened the remaining three. When smudging is used, usually each person sitting in the circle will 'bath' themselves in the smoke metaphorically to clear the eyes, ears, hearts, and mind: "getting rid of negative energy and to open themselves to positive energy" (p.68). The act of **'praying'** and smudging is primarily a thanksgiving acknowledgement to the **Creator** for all of the gifts for life. It is also a call for participants to work with open minds and hearts for the task at hand. I am cautious about using the word 'prayer' because of its religious connotations. Opening invocation is the term I use for this purpose

3. Once the beginning stages of the circle is finished, often, but not always a **traditional and sacred symbol such as a stone, or an eagle feather is passed around the circle and each person holding the symbol speaks his/her turn.** When Individuals hold the object they could speak as little or as long as they feel it is necessary: the "person is free to speak as long as the object is held" (Hart, p. 68). In addition to this process, if the group leader felt it was necessary, once each person said her/his piece, the object can then be placed in the centre of the circle and if people want to add to what was already said they could. In some practices, if this is done "Anyone wishing to speak must pick up the object" (Hart, P. 68), or simply speak freely with the symbol placed in the centre. This second chance to speak encourages more ideas, thought, opinions, and experiences to be recalled.

4. Once the circle is complete, the group leader takes the last position of speaking, and depending on the purpose of the circle, s/he will thank each person for what was shared, and may add some words of encouragement, thoughts, information, and future actions resulting from the circle work. Sometimes, individuals are reminded, at this stage, of the Aboriginal concepts and philosophies governing sharing circles. They will then be asked to honour these important **"teachings"** as they leave the group. In the case of this research, each individual was reminded to honour the confidentiality of individual voices. As the researcher, I honoured anonymity by not using 'real' names nor naming sites of employment.

5. Finally, before anyone leaves the circle, people demonstrate their appreciation, trust, understanding, and honour of each other's viewpoints by staying in the circle for closing comments, a handshake, or a hug following the circle seating. **Closing appreciation/thanksgiving comments** are usually shared at this point. This part can be conducted by an Elder, if present or by the group leader.

Also, in order to honour another **Aboriginal tradition** of drawing from **Elders'** knowledge and expertise with sharing circle work, when I could I invited an Elder, a colleague with whom I have worked, to open the two circles, guide the smudging with sweetgrass and to close the circles. In another circle, one of the participants offered to do the opening and closing as she was experienced in opening, conducting and closing circle works. In the other two cases, I did the openings. We used sweetgrass to smudge for three of the five circles.

Another **Aboriginal practice** that I utilized in this process is offering **'tobacco'** a sacred medicine that has cultural and spiritual significance. In this way I honoured a tradition that includes respect for the values of using 'tobacco' as an important bridge to the transaction of drawing from the Elder's knowledge and expertise, and participants' stories as **'good medicine'**. Tobacco is considered a traditional 'medicine' and it is used for healing, praying, teaching, and working.

According to Aboriginal (more specific to Cree and Ojibway teachings) traditional teachings "tobacco is 'the first plant' given by the Creator, thus its use in ceremony" (All My Relations, 1988, p.19) and its use when requesting help. It is **symbolic** of the opener of good thoughts, good interactions; it communicates honour and understanding of Aboriginal perspectives in the interaction.

I worked with people who knew this tradition, which is re-emerging in many venues. Because I was relying on Aboriginal people to 'help' me with this research journey, I decided to use tobacco to demonstrate my gratitude to them. For example, for the purpose of this research project, I asked the participants to give of their experiences, their knowledge, their thoughts, and their commitment to make this thesis a reality. I also informed them that I would provide a copy of my thesis to each person that was involved: a **gift** to acknowledge their contributions. By understanding the research outcomes, they knew that in giving their time and energy to this project that they are contributing to a body of knowledge that is needed to contribute to the improvement of Aboriginal Peoples. Also, in preparation for the sharing circle I offered tobacco to the Elder as a way of asking him to carry out a certain responsibility.

In chapter two I wrote about my childhood experiences using tobacco as a sacred symbol. So in my experience as an Aboriginal educator, I found it refreshing to observe that 'tobacco passed between hands' as requests were made. Tobacco bundles (small amounts of tobacco wrapped in small cloth bundle bags, small enough to hold in one's hand) have been passed on to people who

were called upon to help in political, cultural and spiritual events. I have witnessed this happening at conferences and meetings, and when I have been approached to help someone in need or to get involved in an educational initiative that involves Aboriginal Peoples I have been offered tobacco. In light of this, I find it disheartening to witness the kind of addictive abuse that is placed on tobacco use today. I honour the cultural and sacred significance of tobacco for it's original purpose in our Aboriginal traditions.

### 4.4 Methods and Procedures

I carried out my research process in stages that included the following. After reflecting and making decisions about a possible thesis topic, I made an oral presentation to the ATC members outlining my idea of research project. I then drafted up a proposal that outlined my research plan inclusive of the emerging stories of themes and issues in the lives of the ATC members. Upon acceptance of my proposal and receiving approval from the ethics committee I set out to conduct my research. I received a letter of support for my research project from the ATC 1994 Co-Chair. I mailed a notice of my research intentions to every ATC member on the list. Three months after I sent the research notification letter, I mail and/or hand delivered a self-designed biographical questionnaire to every ATC member on the list. I reviewed the returned and completed survey/questionnaires. At this point I integrated data from the initial observations and the questionnaires into a story context that I introduced in the

sharing circles and interviews in lieu of asking direct research question(s). In other words, at this point I was enriched with data from the emergent themes in the lives of the ATC members (initial observations) and the data from the questionnaires that I merged for the story building that I brought to the audio recorded sharing circles and personal interviews. I transcribed the data from all my sources: initial observations, questionnaires and finally the sharing circles and interviews. I read the transcriptions to look for themes, read them again, reflected upon them, reread, then sorted and organized them under the themes that had emerged early on in this thesis journey. Finally I synthesized the research findings in story form by following the guiding themes/issues that seemed most prevalent in their lives. In this way I was able to work through purpose of this thesis: describing the experiences and the meanings attached to those experiences of the Aboriginal Teachers' Circle members who worked within mainstream education systems. I will describe each process here briefly:

### 4.4.1 Research Idea: ATC and Proposal

In 1992 I became a member of the ATC. After two years working in solidarity/community with the ATC members I started reflecting upon observations I made about our collective experiences – historically, presently and future hopes. I discussed an idea I had about conducting my doctoral research with the then Chair who expressed support of my idea. I make a presentation about my idea for a research project at a monthly meeting of the group in 1994

June. I answered many questions that the members had and many of them openly supported my idea and even suggested that they would like to participate in the research process. Over the next three years, I drafted up my proposal that outlined my research plan inclusive of the emerging stories of themes and issues (see chapter three for the themes and issues) in the lives of the ATC members.

### 4.4.2 Distributing Research Notification Letter

The 1994 ATC co-chairs suggest that I mail a letter to all the members to inform them of my research plans that they endorsed. Therefore, I wrote a letter called a "Research notification letter to all ATC members" to each member in June of 1997 outlining my research plans. I sent this letter to the ATC members before obtaining the ethics approval for this research since it was primarily to inform the participants of what to expect in the research and let them think about whether or not they might like to participate.

### 4.4.3 Biographical Questionnaire

I prepared a self-designed survey questionnaire instrument for the Aboriginal Teachers' Circle members to complete. The intent of the survey was to get a picture of the members' biographical and career backgrounds and get an indication of their participation in Aboriginal community and education activities. After I received ethics review approval, during the first week of September 1997, I mailed a research package to the ATC membership that included a) the survey questionnaire, b) another copy of the research notification letter sent earlier in

June, c) a letter that laid out the research in more detail, d) a letter of endorsement (from the ATC chairs) for the project, and e) and an "informant consent form". After the participants had the package in their hands for at least two weeks I called the people on my list and asked them: Did you get the package? Are you comfortable with filling it out and participating in this study? Do you need help with the survey? For the people who indicated that they would like to participate and if I did not receive any completed package, I followed up with another telephone call to encourage participation and completion of the surveys. Of course, if the individuals stated up front that they did not wish to be a part of this research process I thanked them for their time and I did not bother them with the follow up calls. I did extend the calls and deadlines for receiving the completed questionnaires over a few months since the ATC members were extremely busy people and for those who wanted to complete the survey I had a flexible time for when I received the returned packages.

The types of questions I composed for the questionnaire were inspired by the emerging themes and issues that I observed in the lives of ATC members (chapter three of this thesis). With these emerging themes in mind I developed questions to address the following: Name; community of origin (it has been my experience that many Aboriginal People who lived in the city most of their adult life will still refer to their First Nation community of origin that indicates a continuous connection to their heritage); language(s) understood – spoken;

cultural, spirituality and/or religion practices; gender; location of residence (Inner City or other); degree(s) obtained; at what age the member entered university; when their teaching, or professional career started after graduation; school placements and positions held; terms of employment; how long they have known about the ATC; their participation level at meetings of the ATC; their understanding of the mission and goals of ATC; understanding and/or celebrating their Aboriginal background: examples include legal/political identity, cultural/linguistic identity, level of political involvement, level of social and cultural involvement; understanding of Aboriginal issues; level of support they received for culturally relevant teaching; and what kinds of Aboriginal knowings and processes they worked with in their teaching.

The survey process and response results occurred as follows: I prepared 88 packages for mailing according to the ATC membership list. When I followed up on the accuracy of mailing addresses I was unable to mail 22 packages due to addresses unknown. Therefore, 66 packages were mailed to members whose addresses were known. Still, twelve packages were returned as "address unknown". That left 54 members who potentially received the package: sixteen members completed the survey and mailed their packages back to me. Six other individuals stayed involved in the sharing circles or interviews but did not complete the survey. I decided that participating in the remainder of the thesis project was not subject to completing the survey questionnaires. Therefore, 22 of the 54 ATC members who received the research package participated in this

research project through the questionnaire, sharing circles and/or interviews. Understandably, not all ATC members participated in this research for various reasons. I suggested that one possible reason was that ATC members might read the survey questionnaire and they might determine that there is an obvious bias toward the challenging and troubling of mainstream education while asserting Aboriginal knowings and processes. So, if people were at all feeling that they are comfortable with my assertion of this place/space they would likely have ignored the questionnaire, which I respect and understand.

### 4.4.4 Questionnaire Responses: '*Storying*' in lieu of Research Question(s)

Indeed, the responses to these survey questions provided a comprehensive profile of the educators who completed the survey. From the participant responses to this survey I learned more about the demographic and biographical characteristics of this group. Also, once I combined this piece of data with the initial observations, the emerging themes and issues were like pieces to the puzzle (Elijah, 1998) of building the 'stories' of their experiences. This method informed the framework for developing and expanding on the 'story' in lieu of "research question(s)" for the participants' to respond to the sharing circles, and interviews. The next task was to organize and conduct the sharing circles and personal interviews.

### 4.4.5 Sharing Circles

Upon receiving final indications (completion of surveys and verbal requests) from the ATC members' willingness to participate in this research, I organized sharing circles and/or interviews with any participant interested in becoming involved at any stage of the research project. I called the people on my list: those who returned the surveys and those who indicated that they were still interested in the project. Initially, I had planned on only having two sharing circles however I decided to accommodate all of the members who wanted to participate in this research process. I felt that accommodating the interests of the participants was a priority over screening individuals for the circle. I was sensitive to the fact that selecting some members for the sharing circles meant excluding others so I decided that due to the small group of respondents that it was feasible to include all participants in the sharing circles if they wished to be involved. I was pleased that the ATC members were interested in this project and I felt that in this way they were continuing their commitment to quality Aboriginal education. Finally, in June of 1998, I conducted 5 sharing circles with numbers that ranged from three to seven participants in each inclusive of me. I prepared food for the participants that we ate before the sharing circles and/or interviews. This gathering helped to bring us into focus and warm up to each other over friendships, food and chats. Also, I presented a 'tobacco bundle' to participants to acknowledge my gratitude for their participation in this research journey.

Co-ordinating, arranging, and conducting this type of group gathering (i.e. sharing circles) added to the richness of the data gathered. Fontana & Frey (1994) noted that gathering data at various levels is critical to the research process. One major consideration about the sharing circles was how I would document what was being said. Hence, in addition to making notes after each sharing circle, I audio taped the participants as they spoke. The participants were agreeable to the audio-taping. I assured them that I would destroy the tapes once I finished the transcribing.

### 4.4.6 Personal Interviews

Another level of data gathering in qualitative research paradigms is utilizing face-to-face interviews (Fontana & Frey, 1994) because it "is one of the most common and most powerful ways we use to try to understand our fellow human beings" (361). Qualitative researchers use interviews for reasons depending on the research topic. For the purpose of this research study, I used the face-to-face interview to produce yet another angle of the data for description and "academic analysis" (Fontana & Frey, p 361) and to further understand the perspective of the participants.

I planned to interview at least one or two participants following each sharing circle. However I was only able to follow up with one interview from the sharing circle and two individual interviews of participants who missed the circles but still wanted to maintain involvement. I planned for individuals selected from

the sharing circles to have another opportunity to clarify certain points they may have raised in the circles if they wished, and an opportunity to raise other points they may not have thought about in the sharing circle. However, I decided to just use the one-on-one interview method to ensure that, as many of the participants that wanted to be involved were included in this process. I presented the same question/story to which the interview participants responded. Just as I did in the sharing circles, I prepared food when it was appropriate – when the interviews were held at my home and I offered each participant a 'tobacco bundle'.

### 4.5 Merging the Pieces into Stories

Now I had the task of looking at all of my data. I had information from the initial observations, the biographical surveys and audio-tapes of sharing circles and personal interviews. I transcribed pages and pages of text from each of these sources. Fortunately, I had a guiding framework of themes that I used to sort out my work from the work I did with the initial observations. Still, I needed to read and re-read many times over to determine that the words did indeed follow the themes.

In order to protect the anonymity of any participant, I summarized some of the main themes and events as they occurred in their sharing of them to avoid actual connections to who said what. I also do not present actual names of individuals or the educational institutions and sites where they worked - I simply

referred to them as sites and/or positions. Therefore, those who were present in the circles and by any individual who spoke them may only remember any quotes. Beyond this guesses can only be made.

It is important to note here that as a colleague and an Aboriginal sister I was reticent about renaming individuals whose own identities "must" be replaced with "anonymous" ones in this research process. However, I deferred to the research ethics that claim that the individual must be protected against any potential harm to his or her person because s/he has chosen to participate in a research project. I respected this principle and I attempted to live with it in a way that respected both the individuals and the principles of research ethics. Although, it is the stories-issues-themes that become apparent in this research 'space' I want to make it clear that it was the individual identities, connected to Aboriginal communities, who shared those stories (those gifts) with me the researcher, as recorder, as listener, as sense-maker and as story-teller. They 'gifted' me with their words, their 'teachings' to pass on the telling-of-their-words with some analysis to make sense of their stories. I pass this on to the reader-listeners-learners in order to continue to thread that circle of learning and life and advancing Aboriginal knowings and processes. In Chapter Five, I introduce the themes in more detail.

# CHAPTER 5

## AFTER THE SHARING: MAKING SENSE OF THE DATA

### 5.1 Visions in Our Lives

> *The seeking of any vision requires a period of preparation. There is the initial preparation of settings one's intent, asking questions, and psychological empowerment. Then there is a process of seeking; a preparation accomplished by exploring the paths of the landscape through which one must pass, learning its story, and physical nature. That landscape may be internal as well as external. It is essentially coming to know those things, stories, people, or events important to your self-knowledge and your quest. It is about history; not the kind of history that is in books...but the kind of history that lives in the minds and hearts of a People. It is the oral history that presents how a people see themselves in their journey as a People. The key is learning to seek in a way that reclaims a people's oral history and cultural tradition for the purpose of constructing a transformative vision. We must establish dialogue about what our visions might be and try things out. We must appreciate what others have done in formal and informal ways, big and small, past and present. In this way we energize our visions as we live and grow. This is not as complex as it may sound since Indigenous educational processes have numerous vehicles for doing this. (Cajete, 1994, p.192)*

*Ke nunaskamitin* Cajete. (I thank you Cajete). I thought how fitting it is to be able to introduce the participants' *atchanookewina* (stories) with this quote as a conceptual framework. I reflected on the work that transpired with this thesis. There was the thinking through of research topics, proposal writing, working with the ATC members, and working with the participants. There was the listening to and recording participants' stories. Then my journey of reading/writing-rewriting/reading-reading/writing-rewriting/reading, and finally 'hearing' and 'seeing' the themes in their stories and carefully recasting their words under the representative circles of emergent themes. I think about how much their themes

and words reflected what Cajete wrote, it is really about visioning, preparing, working, visioning again and working toward that vision. Therefore, I propose that a kind of visioning is evident in the words of the participants. What is the vision of the teachers? Visions are not always evident to us; they may come coincidentally and/or incidentally. They may come when we least expect them or we can consciously think through our visions to reality.

In order to link this chapter into the circle of participants' stories in chapters six through nine, I organized the participants' profiles and story themes into two sections. In the first section, Chapter 5.1.2, I provide a profile of the participants' biographical backgrounds that demonstrates the 'vision' in the participants' combined accomplishments (their giftedness). As I indicated in this thesis, our Aboriginal community would tend to 'see' the participants as source of 'teachings' that can be accessed through their work in education. In the second section of this chapter I introduce the participants' stories by highlighting significant pieces to the emergent themes. Then in chapters six, seven, eight, and nine I present stories by citing participant quotes and a discussion that reflects the meanings attached to those experiences. When I commented on participant words and provided a discussion to the stories, I tried to reflect what the Aboriginal scholars contended: to trouble Western paradigms, decolonize our thinking processes and assert Aboriginal knowings and processes. I wanted to do this in a way that was respectful yet challenging.

### 5.1.2 Accomplishments: Gifts to Aboriginal Education

Here I introduce the participants by 'profiling' their accomplishments and I suggest that their visions (intentional or serendipitously) have been realized in one way or another. According to Cajete's words, in order to have accomplished something a vision had to be present first. This piece of the story speaks to the profiles and backgrounds of the participants that I wrote about in chapter three of this thesis as one piece of the emerging themes that guided this thesis. Reiterating some of these points here is intended to show how these and more participant accomplishments did in fact emerge from the data collection. Some of the points may seem repetitive, however, I remind us of on an Aboriginal teaching that Elders talk about: the process of repeating a point here and there, or a story here and there is important to our learning because after rereading (rehearing) and listening again and again to a story we tend to hear/read something we missed earlier.

Also, I suggest that the career profiles and background in the lives of the participants shows an impressive 'resume' of accomplishments that can be accessed as an educational resource for culturally relevant programming in all aspects of education. Therefore, Who are the Participants? What did they do? Where did they work? I combined their biographical information and accomplishments to demonstrate the kinds of activities that they have undertaken. In many ways, these activities reflect the dedication, the commitment, the depth and breadth of their service and work interests, and their

commitments to rekindling Aboriginal knowings. As I mentioned earlier in this section, the data, gleaned from the questionnaires, sharing circles and interviews, supported and added to the educator profiles and backgrounds discussed in chapter three of this thesis.

For example, the participants tended to enter their career later in life: as mature adults as opposed to as young adults who went sequential from high school into university. The held positions as administrators, teachers, community workers, and civil servants, and their places of employment included schools, universities, colleges, and governments. There were more females than males in the study, reflective of the ATC membership. The educators reflected primarily status Indians and Métis backgrounds, to my knowledge no Inuit people were known to be a member of the ATC, so they were also absent in the research. The participants in this study primarily represented Ojibway, Cree, and Oji-Cree peoples who make up the majority of the Aboriginal peoples in the province of Manitoba. Almost all of the members who participated in this study had acknowledged they had a mixed heritage of Aboriginal and European backgrounds regardless of their status Indian or Métis classifications. In addition to the English language, most of the members acknowledged that they also either understood or spoke their mother tongue. The issue of Status and non-status was something that the members acknowledged but they maintained that it did not matter what 'status' one held because it was the larger issues of

improving on the quality of lives of our Aboriginal peoples from their knowings and practices is what mattered.

The members' ages ranged from early 30's to early 60's: the majority age was mid-forties. The number of years participants lived in Winnipeg, Manitoba ranged from 5 years to all of their lives. The majority of the participants were also active in the Aboriginal community. They kept in touch with their original communities for reasons related to family, social, and cultural connections. The participants lived Winnipeg for political, economic and education reasons. In a few instances, the members lived in suburban areas but commuted to inner city schools because of their expressed interest in working with 'their own people'.

While some participants taught mainstream subjects many others conducted work and volunteer/service responsibilities related to Aboriginal education. If the member could not ground his/her work in Aboriginal perspectives there was the opportunity to get involved in the work of ATC. Most of the participants pursued areas of interest and research or activities related to Aboriginal education, issues and cultural and spiritual focus in the work. For example, a few of the participants gained recognition as 'traditional teachers' for the purpose of carrying out Aboriginal traditional philosophies and practises and teachings related to their geographic, cultural and Spiritual knowledge. This means that within their respective Knowledges gained from Aboriginal 'teachers and Elders' they learned about traditional Aboriginal knowings and practices and the means for teaching them. These members were sometimes called in to

provide this type of expertise in learning sites across k-12, and basic Adult education to post secondary.

There were many different kinds of Aboriginal focussed social, political, cultural, language and spiritual activities that most of the members included in their lives, whether in their work sites or in their personal lives. Some of these activities included co-ordination, organizing, leading, teaching, or simply participating as a learner in events like:

- Métis fiddling and square dancing,
- crafts and beading,
- making traditional clothing for cultural events,
- storytelling of Metis and First Nations issues,
- cultural and spiritual 'teachings',
- feasts and give-aways,
- sweat lodge ceremonies, tobacco teachings,
- traditional dances and drumming and singing,
- pow wows, pipe ceremonies,
- medicine picking and teachings,
- attending teachings by Elders and traditional teachers,
- various Aboriginal focussed conferences,
- seminars and circles, women's teachings,
- symbol teachings related to the cradle board, dream catchers etc. and,
- issues oriented discussion and circles, committees and councils.

Furthermore, I provide a list of some of the responsibilities the educators carried out in their workplaces:

- Developing specific Aboriginal studies units,
- Working with educator's that requested assistance to integrate Aboriginal studies and perspectives into the curriculum,
- Providing educational leadership, consultation and supports to cultural-based activities,
- Teaching at-risk students (most of whom were Aboriginal),
- Raising funds to support Aboriginal based activities,
- Working in teacher teams as leader or member to support school goals,
- Assisting community to become aware and act on Aboriginal education goals,
- Serving on various committees either at their workplace or in the

community,

- Providing administrative support,
- Working with Aboriginal adult students for literacy and high school certification,
- Providing liaisons between home and school and between school and counsellors,
- Co-ordinating links between parents, teachers, students, and the community.
- Co-ordinating cultural events and activities like pow wows, both Metis and First Nation's dances, songs, crafts, and language development.
- Identifying, sorting out and providing resource materials on Aboriginal education to respective educational settings.
- Providing ceremonial supports to and teachings for cultural/spiritual events.
- Teaching Aboriginal studies through lessons and units and Native languages.
- Reviewing Aboriginal studies programs and curriculum, and recommending changes, providing curriculum supports to schools, and developing resource materials.

When the participants spoke about community origins, most talked about coming from communities (rural First Nation/Metis; bush and Northern communities) where traditional economic lifestyles was the norm during the time of their youth. Hence, those who came from these communities recalled activities like berry picking/preserving, game hunting, collecting eggs in marshes, drying moose meat and fish, preparing moose hides, beading/craft work, preparing traditional foods, listening to stories about 'old ways', placing tobacco on the land when medicines were picked, and placing tobacco down for the 'little people' (there are many stories about 'little people' who live in the water/woods and only certain people who are gifted can see them).

It is important to acknowledge that a few participants stated that Christianity was an important aspect of their life. However, sometimes I worry

about how an over-identification of Christianity might continue the shunning of Aboriginal knowings and practices. In spite of this orientation, these participants did support the idea that the schools and teachers must advance Aboriginal education activities even if they were not personally or professionally involved in them. They usually related that information because they "believed" they did not have the Aboriginal cultural/spiritual knowledge they felt comfortable just to teach the mainstream curriculum and provide advocacy and academic supports to their Aboriginal students. They did state, however, that they did understand historic issues and tried ways to teach from a place of rights. I have seen these same members participate in many of the events by contributing their time and energy to the many tasks of pulling an event together. Even if the event had a more cultural and spiritual focus to it like Pow wows, smudging, and circle works and such, they were present. Perhaps this is the beginning stage of becoming immersed in Aboriginal knowings and practices in Aboriginal traditional spirituality and culture.

Yet, there were other participants who worked at rekindling, developing, maintaining, and/or asserting Aboriginal education perspectives into their lives in one form or another. As a way of lifelong learning they have integrated Aboriginal perspectives throughout their continuing personal and professional education by writing, reading, taking courses, attending or leading ceremonies, attending and/or presenting at conferences. Even if they were not integrating Aboriginal culture, language and spirituality into their lives and teaching, they

participated through various forms of social and political activism for various Aboriginal causes. Also, they found other ways to bring Aboriginal issues to the fore through teaching Native history, social studies or geography units. Furthermore, they have acted on acted on issues and concerns, led circles and discussion groups, served on committees and councils, and participated as members of Aboriginal focussed groups and organizations. Their presentations have varied and included children, youth, adults and Elders in the quest for advancing culturally relevant Aboriginal education and the improvement of the lives of Aboriginal peoples. The kinds of issues various members took up in their community contributions included: HIV & AIDS education, suicide prevention, anti-racism activities, fostering of Aboriginal children, residential healing workshops, addictions prevention, taking a stand against the prostitution of Aboriginal youth, supporting anti-apartheid movements in the 70's, cross-cultural presentations, working with youth around gang prevention to name a few.

There were educators who used varied forms of delivery methods of Aboriginal issues and perspectives through art, writing and drama as ways for their students to gain knowledge about our histories and issues, and culture and spirituality. Furthermore, inclusive approaches were used to include and acknowledge both traditional culture and language specific knowledge related to all Aboriginal groups: status Indian, non-status Indians, Metis and Inuit peoples. In spite of the focus on Aboriginal knowings and processes: intentionally or otherwise, the participants recognized that they cannot avoid working our

knowledges into mainstream education as the state controls what constitutes the kind of curriculum should be delivered in our educational institutions. Creating Aboriginal spaces as they did in their work is therefore so important.

The profiles of the participants are indeed comprehensive. When I reviewed and listed their accomplishments I felt elated and proud to know that we have so much to offer as Aboriginal educators. Furthermore, as we can read from their profiles, participants' backgrounds reflected diversity in who they were, what they did, and their connections to Aboriginal knowings and practices. So whether or not the participants realize it: **they have visions and the capacity to work toward those visions.**

### 5.1.3 Emerging Themes

As the researcher of this thesis journey, one of my responsibilities was to read the transcribed data, recognize themes and sort them under the emerging themes discussed in chapter three of this thesis. Therefore, I present highlights to each individual participant's story under the following headings: Chapter Six, the Circle of Aboriginal Career Paths: Barriers and Opportunities; Chapter seven, the Circle of Uneasy Relations: Racial/Cultural Differences; Chapter eight, Awakening to Cultural/Language Disruptions: Reclaiming and Developing Aboriginal Identities; and Chapter eight, Asserting Aboriginal Education Grounded in Aboriginal Perspectives.

5.1.3.1 Aboriginal career paths: barriers and Opportunities

The career paths of the participants indeed reflected the complex barriers and opportunities that emerged in their quest for employment satisfaction. This section highlighted important aspects of getting an education, a job, and the experiences that the participants faced as they walked this path. This path has been rocky for the most part and the participants shared the different issues or opportunities they encountered. I suggested earlier (see Chapter 3) that the decision to work in sites where a large number of Aboriginal students attended included a combination of the following factors: (A) Aboriginal educators want to work and serve amongst our own people. (B) We have the desire and the community 'pull' to contribute through our careers to advancing Aboriginal wellness in education, economics, culture and language preservation and maintenance both in the Aboriginal community and Canadian society. (C) The wishes of community, parents and leaders for Aboriginal educators return to their own communities in one way or another (this could mean working in urban settings with places of employment where the primary audience is Aboriginal peoples). These wishes and concerns have been coupled with the desire that Aboriginal students need to do well both in the "white world" and the "Aboriginal world" by being biculturally effective (Battiste, 1998, Colorado, 1988, Fitznor, 1998; Graveline, 2000).

Historically, as Aboriginal peoples we have experienced disruptions to our identities and life ways (languages and cultures). It is understandable then that

as Aboriginal educators, leaders and parents we would want our children "close to home". Therefore, having educators "in the system" so to speak, in institutions, where they can foster Aboriginal knowings and processes through their careers is a bonus. This theme was evident in their stories.

Ongoing education "formal/informal" can play an important role in advancing and deepening the principles of one's career while opening the doors to many other possibilities such as that of waking up (Couture, 2000) about the historic oppressive and colonizing processes imposed on our peoples. Many of the participants implied that education was/is an important space where we can both 'decolonize' and 'advance' Aboriginal education. From Aboriginal knowings and processes, it usually means that once the learner becomes committed to pursuing Aboriginal oriented educational experiences then a number of activities inevitably take place that makes that experience decolonizing. Writers in this field suggested that we must undergo a decolonizing process (Battiste 1995; Cajete, 1994; Cole, 2000; Fitznor, 1998; Graveline, 2000; & Smith, 2000). A process that serves to both challenge the assimilative intents of Canadian governments and educational institutions and to find ways to reclaim, reconnect with, and re-value our traditional wisdom, Elders knowledge's, cultures, languages and peoples. I suggest that this is a decolonizing process that emerges from the insights of reflecting critically upon our history of oppression and colonization and becoming conscious (awakening) to political acts of self-determination in education. When the participants underwent their university and career experiences there were

times when they had to deal with their Aboriginality or with Aboriginal issues in the classroom. Clearly, this is something that the participants have recognized as being an important part of their development.

One other experience that emerges time and again is that of individual's who moved from one job/position to another or one teaching site to another. This event was evident in all of the stories when the topic of their sharing concentrated on where they worked, how long they worked at their place(s) of employment, what they did, why they left and where they went next. The reasons they left their places of employment varied but included the following points: issues related to conflict (examples: between colleagues, around the lack of Aboriginal content/delivery or support of Aboriginal students etc.); in some cases moving on into more responsible positions (administration) or from a teacher's aide to entering a teacher education degree; moving into areas where there was a stronger Aboriginal focus; or moving into schools that had a higher concentration of Aboriginal students; moving into a community education positions that supported educators who wanted to incorporate Aboriginal content.

5.1.3.2 Uneasy Relations: Issues of Differences Related to Race/Culture

Here I outline the various tensions that emerged as they related to racial and cultural differences. These tensions centred primarily between mainstream education and Aboriginal educators and the needs and aspirations of Aboriginal students, parents, and teachers. These issues were dealt with in a number of

ways, some of which were helpful to the situation and others not. Some Aboriginal educators faced this knowledge and experience of "difference" on a daily basis. Skin colour also played into these tensions: it seemed that if the participant was light-skinned and not vocal about his/her Aboriginal heritage then no overt tensions occurred, but if s/he was vocal about his/her Aboriginal heritage then tensions were more likely to occur. If the educator was dark-skinned with physical features that "hinted" at their "Aboriginality" then more negative experiences were overtly encountered due to stereotyping. These were issues the educators spoke about in various meetings and sharing sessions

Some of the stories related to experiences of difference around issues of the lack of acceptance (of Aboriginal perspectives), mainstream resistance to asserting Aboriginal identities and rights, cultural and language perspectives. The stories demonstrated how the participants were advocates of Aboriginal students who were marginalized and who faced acts of racism and bias in the curriculum. Furthermore there were emergent issues that reflected stereotyping, racist comments and behaviours as the participants experienced them and other times as they witnessed their Aboriginal students being at the brunt of racist comments. Some of these stories are related to feelings about Aboriginal self-esteem. In some cases of suddenly realizing that being Aboriginal was being "different" and feeling shame of one's heritage because of this difference. I submit this is a case of internalized racism and learned helplessness and cultural self-hatred (Cajete, 1994; Haig-Brown, 1995).

The participants also shared stories that reflected their experiences of standing up for students who faced stereotyped and racist comments and actions by their teachers. One of the common issues that surfaced was that of the kind of expectations that were placed on Aboriginal individuals who were educators when they entered their professions. For example, they were expected to know all there was to know about Aboriginal education and perspectives and just simply integrate them into their work. They were expected to just step in and teach a class in Aboriginal studies. Even if the participants choose to work in places where there was a large number of Aboriginal students, they were not necessary thinking that they would need to teach Native Studies other than being there to support/advocate for Aboriginal students. They simply wanted to be able to support the Aboriginal students who were marginalized in the system (like they were in their schooling experiences). I offer a clarification here: the educators were not objecting to teaching or working from an Aboriginal knowings and practices or finding ways to develop the focus in Native studies for example, they were just objecting to the kinds of stereotyping that occurred just because of their identity. This is how the participants experienced and understood how their 'difference' was taken up.

#### 5.1.3.3 Awakening to Cultural/Language Disruptions: Reclaiming and Developing Aboriginal Identities, Perspectives and Philosophies

In chapter 8, I invite the reader to 'listen' to the participants' voicing their experiences with Aboriginal identification 'insights'. They speak of critical points when they became more aware of colonization and impacts of racism and

oppression in our lives (including their concerns for Aboriginal students). One of the gifts of being an Aboriginal educator in contemporary times is the availability and access to various publications and oral expressions (elder circles, conference presentations etc) that both challenge colonization processes and reflect Aboriginal knowledge, identity, worldviews, and perspectives. The opportunity to be in spaces where the participants were able to celebrate their heritage was important to developing positive Aboriginal identification. Many of the participants viewed their identities as Aboriginal Peoples central to their work: they had self-identified in positive ways with their heritage in one way or another. However, this was not always the case for all participants; their stories tell us that. Their stories here speak to this awakening into a more positive identification with heritage.

Furthermore, the process of delving into the full essence of living an Aboriginal existence was complicated by the dominance of mainstream values (Fitznor, 1998; RCAP, 1996). For example understanding and working into one's life cultural, spiritual, political, historic issues, needs and aspirations grounded in Aboriginal perspectives, for the first time or on a more focused basis became an experience of awakenings, unlearnings and learnings. Sometimes these processes of reclaiming, rekindling, remembering, reconnecting, and self-discovery - processes, which The Report of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (1996) takes up in detail, came into their lives as they studied or were immersed in their positions as educators. Sometimes, this process happened

where circumstances presented themselves within incidents of racism and, stereotyping.

Consequently, chapter 8 speaks of the participants' experiences of awakening, awareness, reconnecting, reclaiming, and/or developing Aboriginal knowings and practices, developing more positive or deeper identity awareness in their experience as an Aboriginal person. In order for the participants to focus their responses, I asked them to consider the reasons why many of our people were disconnected from our heritage. I suggested for some Aboriginal People, living from Aboriginal knowings and practices was not always possible during their growing up years because of a number of reasons related to situations where people were separated from their families, cultures, and philosophies. Some of these reasons were related to residential school experiences, adoptions, interracial family forms etc. I asked them to think about how these might have played out in their own lives. Some Aboriginal parents who could pass as "White" or "French" were silent about their heritage and therefore they did not promote this part of themselves for reasons related to hurtful experiences of racism and oppression: it was easier to not allow this part of the heritage to emerge. Many of our people have been subjected to the atrocities of residential school life and its aftermath. The experiences for many were alienating and hurting. People were not allowed to express their Aboriginal identity in these schools. I felt that this context was critical so that it might ease some anxiety about reasons why our peoples are at different stages of understanding and connecting to Aboriginal

identity. Furthermore, I suggested that many of our people who experienced major disconnections to Aboriginal lives 'come into their own' in celebrating, developing, and asserting their Aboriginal heritage. The various connection/disconnection to or immersion/non-immersion in Aboriginal knowings, philosophies, understanding worldviews, perspectives, involvement with traditional knowledge, (culture and languages, spirituality etc) differed from one person to another. Their stories indicated that some of these foregoing points in fact did occur.

5.1.3.4 Asserting Aboriginal Knowings and Practices: Complex Spaces

In chapter 9, the participants share voices that demonstrate the confidence to assert who we are as Aboriginal peoples. Aboriginal educators who were active members in the ATC tended to be active in pursuing culturally based and appropriate curriculum in their practice, this seemed to be the case too with the participants. The process of rekindling and asserting Aboriginal knowings and processes in their work sites was met with different responses. Sometimes mainstream, and in rare instances Aboriginal, administrators and colleagues welcomed the change but most of the time they seemed to resist their expressions.

The stories here demonstrated how the participants were involved in asserting Aboriginal education perspectives and philosophies from many different levels and in many different ways. In some cases, educators worked at promoting Aboriginal cultural perspectives through immersion in language

teaching or traditional and cultural/spiritual teachings. Others drew from Aboriginal studies, history, cultures and traditions or taught about Aboriginal self-determination and human rights issues in the classroom. Another aspect of asserting Aboriginal perspectives was the kinds of activities around lobbying, advocating (on behalf of students, issues, curriculum changes etc), and placing issues on the various agendas for discussion and action occurred. In these stories we find that the educators accessed and drew from various Aboriginal symbols, arts, teachings and/or tackled issues that confronted Aboriginal peoples and cultures. In addition, the kind of traditions, cultural/language symbols, issues/concerns that were integrated into the work of the educators reflected the dominant cultural/linguistic groups in the province: Ojibway/Cree. If the opportunity was there to bring in Aboriginal educators from different cultural groups like the Mohawk or Lakota then those would have been the cultural expressions taught. In addition, it is also important to keep in mind that when the topic of learning was Native studies, more general and diverse information would have been taught to the children.

It is important to note that the stories that are shared here are not simply individual interests, but something greater. As stated by McLaren (1994) when he referred to students' experiences he said, teachers are "dealing primarily with students whose stories, memories, narratives, and reading of the world are inextricably related to wider social and cultural formations and categories. It is important here to understand how the voices and experiences of students have

been subject to and shaped by historical and cultural factors such as those of race, class, and gender" (p.148/9). In this way, I recognized that I was dealing with teachers as learners in this process and that this process might/could help to clarify their historical experiences of oppression and their cogniznance of reclaiming and rekindling Aboriginal knowings and processes.

Consequently, these stories here reflect the attempts that the participants made to integrate Aboriginal values, knowings and ways into their practice and in many ways the stories tell us that 'complex spaces' are the norm when 'doing' Aboriginal education.

### 5.2 Elder's Opening Words to the Stories

In the next four chapters I attempted to cite as much as possible the words, thoughts, actions, feelings and emotions of the participants as they shared their words. Their views, experiences, and their understandings of their experiences are evident in the stories. I also attempted to provide some analysis to provide some meanings to those experiences. In some instances, I leave it to the reader to think about the different themes in the stories and take from them what makes sense; just the same way that traditional teachers and Elders ask us to do that when they are telling stories.

Before we go to the stories I am honoured to introduce some opening comments from an Elder colleague/mentor. I wanted to include some opening comments from my colleague and Elder mentor, Bruce Elijah, who has graciously

allowed me to use his words in this thesis. Bruce, who is a traditional teacher from Oneida of the Thames, Ontario was in the city of Winnipeg teaching a course on Aboriginal culture in his capacity as an elder/traditional teacher when I conducted two of the sharing circles. I invited him to join our circle and conduct an Opening and Closing invocation for the Sharing Circles. Bruce was aware of my research project and he was willing to show his support of my efforts. Bruce has traveled to many places locally, nationally and internationally conducting many circle teachings. He is a sought after traditional teacher who has worked extensively with youth and adults in their path to reclaim Aboriginal knowings and decolonize their learning through many cultural, teaching and healing events. I was fortunate that I knew Bruce from another course (on Aboriginal knowings) that we taught together. I asked Bruce for permission to use some of his words in my thesis to frame the opening and closing pieces to the participants' stories of this thesis. He willingly gave his permission and I am truly thankful that he agreed.

Bruce acknowledged his appreciation for the tobacco that I gave him when I requested that he opens and closes our circle. He began an opening thanksgiving in his Oneida language then he switched to the English language. He introduced his spiritual name and told us that his name meant "The Interpreter of Knowledge" to pass on the Great Law of Peace. When he finished the opening thanksgiving he shared some opening comments about our role in our lives as Aboriginal peoples: I found his comments very inspiring to what this

work is all about. He told us that he did not know that he was being groomed from childhood for this role but he has been working in that role for quite a while now. These are his heartfelt opening words:

> *Whenever we've been asked to come to a meeting what we try to do is to remind our peoples that before we start the meeting, which is going to somehow vocally address to the wants and needs of our peoples, is that we have to remind ourselves of those teachings that was given to us, to all of us. It is always told to us to acknowledge Creation and to acknowledge those teachings that was given to us... about the teachings I never thought that I would be doing the things that I am doing now. I was taught in this way when I was young but at the age of 18 I got away from this because I went to school....then over time I returned...so with that and the prayers that we do we ask the Spirits to help us to say those things that are important to talk about as we do our work.*
>
> *We must try to mold ourselves or put ourselves to where our ancestors have things that they have to teach us. In this stage we try to adjust ourselves to survive in these times...A prophecy tells us that this is the generation that will emerge to show us the way toward a process of healing and wellness. That is our responsibility as teachers.*
>
> *Trying to understand this way, the teachings that was taken away from us for so long is like trying to put a puzzle together. You have the pieces but you need to find how they fit. Do you do the outsides first? Or, the insides? And the other part of that is to ask yourselves "Where do you fit in to these teachings?" Because that is what we strive for we ask ourselves. Who am I? To be able to find that...it is helpful once you find that out. Like I said, your life is like a puzzle. What we do is the easy part first: at the edges then we can finish the inside. What is in the middle takes time to get to know, a long time. That's where you search, and this is a long process. We get to know it, and it's your puzzle, no one else's! You have to ask yourself that before this part is done can you give anything to your children? If you don't have that done can you give anything to our children? So there is that goal it's there* (interesting to note that this is the same goal that the ATC mission reflects*). So with that I want to say thank you for having me here. You may say the things that I may share with you is the teachings and all of our peoples that we work together to share the teachings. This is where we work in ceremonies to help us grow and strive for these teachings. This is what we have to strive for our teachings and our ceremonies and with that we start off with a smudge to help open this circle.*

Bruce prepared a smudge bowl with maple hardwood and sage, which was then passed to each person in the circle to smudge her/himself. Now, it is time to hear the Participants' Ot'atchanookewina (Stories).

# CHAPTER 6

## *Atchanookewina* (stories)

## IN THE CIRCLE OF ABORIGINAL CAREER PATHS: BARRIERS AND OPPORTUNITIES

### 6.1 Sandra O t'atchanookewin[3]

Sandra is a Métis-Ojibway woman, in her forties, who has worked in the educational system in Manitoba for more than 15 years. She stated that she *"always liked working with kids, so after I graduated I went back home...and I started as a teacher's aide and that's where I first started...my career in education"*. She met her husband in this community and together they left for a neighbouring community where she got involved in taking courses and a teacher-training program. She became involved because, as she stated:

> *...I was always interested in my culture simply because I have this little bit and without the history I only went so far...and like I said this was always at the back of my mind because I [felt] that I didn't know too much. I'd hear about Indians on this side and the treaties and about the clans. But, I never came across any of that [in my personal life] so I find it interesting, so I always picture myself as an educator sitting on the fence looking at both sides and finding out the history on this side and the history on that side. But I'm comfortable where I am. I'm comfortable taking [our Aboriginal] knowledge here and taking knowledge there and using it and promoting it out there as how I see it.*

Sandra spoke about her career path of teaching in different schools and educational institutions where she could gain experience in Native education and

she believed that pursuing an education degree will help her get the background she needed to teach in Aboriginal communities. Sandra also recalls hearing her family expressing the need to stay connected to her roots and the scolding she would get from her grandmother if she dared to speak English in their home. As Sandra had her own children and visited her grandmother, she recalled her grandmother saying *"How come you didn't teach your kids to speak their language and why are they speaking English"?* Sandra expressed her appreciation that her grandmother made her think about the need to preserve language and culture in spite of going to mainstream schools. This memory served to help her to seek places (through her education and career focus and sites) where she could continue to work in locations where there was a majority of Native students. For Sandra, this was an important career choice to make and to dedicate to this focus. Furthermore, she was clear about trying to support other educators (Aboriginal or non-Aboriginal) who were looking to strengthen their career focuses in Native education:

> *These teachers, a lot of them have a lot of great ideas, a lot of them are trying to learn the Native culture [on the job] but they don't know where to go for resources. Plus because they're isolated and it's the sharing thing...that's what I'm working on right now [in my work] is to somehow figure out way to get these resources to these teachers.*

It is clear from her comments that Sandra made a deliberate career choice to pursue Aboriginal education perspectives in her work.

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[3] Each of the stories that follow have the participant's made-up name and the word Ot'atchanookewin, which in the Cree languages mean 'her/his story'. For example the first story presented here is Sara's story or Sara O'tatchanookewin.

## 6.2 Casey O *t'achanookwin*

Casey is a Métis-Ojibway man, in his thirties, who was raised in an urban setting. He spoke at length about developing his career path and focus to include Aboriginal knowledge and education. He recalled his own experiences where his career path took him into schools where there were a large number of Aboriginal students when he began to become aware, to 'see' the lack of choices the Aboriginal students seemed to have similar to his own youth background. He wanted to find ways to help the students break out of the poverty cycle through education:

> *...I believe that there are opportunities there for [our students] to seek higher education to move on and break that cycle of poverty that is being created there [in our high schools]. Because I think that what has happened is that because these students receive a poor education they can only get themselves a poor job. And because of that poor job they get to live in poor areas and those poor areas develop poor families and just poor relationships and I think that the ghetto corralling of welfare recipients into low income housing is generating some total problems and I think that education is one way that we can take...our people and move them up that ladder but still keeping that connectiveness (sic), that connection with the culture and I truly believe that there is a way to do this within the western system incorporating and amalgamating the Aboriginal perspective as well as the Eurocentric perspective.*

These words were shared through Casey's own reflections of getting out of poverty and into a positive circle of growth in identifying with his Aboriginal heritage. He continues to reflect upon his own career path:

> *When I got into the education system as a TA. I found out through listening to teachers about the way they would talk about our [Aboriginal] students and they knew as early as grade two or grade four which students would go where and which students would go on to prison and*

*which students would go on to work a minimum wage job and things like that. And they knew all that stuff automatically [Casey is referring to comments he has heard that reflected the attitudes towards Aboriginal students in high schools where he taught]. And that just blew me away. And I just said to myself, there's gotta be a difference, there just gotta be a better way to do this. But I'm thinking that it's the people that make the difference it's the people that do those kinds of things. It's not so much, I don't believe that it's the system, I believe that it's the people within that system. And so I look at myself and I say that, ah, as a young person I think in living in inner city I received a poor education, I guess as a result of that I had very few opportunities to find myself gainful employment until I met people like yourselves (refers to circle participants).*

I wonder if this perception of good employment is an indication of "good education" perhaps a question to consider here: Is Casey still breaking free from western thinking? Casey continues his words:

*You know that woman, that man that made a difference in my life? And after talking to them and realizing and looking around me and seeing other opportunities and other people that are doing things that are Aboriginal and who are <u>proud</u> of who they are, made me realize that I can do those things too! And so that's where I've taken myself and I groomed myself in that direction, but it hurts me and it saddens me to think that there are people out there that do this day in, and day out brainwashing young [Aboriginal] people to think that they are inferior to where these teachers are compared to where our people are.*

It is interesting here that Casey talks about notions of thinking that young people feel inferior. Is he also implying that their knowings are inferior thus their/his need to climb the western ladder? Casey is obviously concerned about what is happening to our young people, but is the key really to have them climb the western ladder? Or is this to the extent to which his believes that this <u>is</u> the way to go? His next statement demonstrates that we need to move into the power structures, perhaps he is just concerned that unless we are within those structures we cannot make changes:

*And I don't know what we can do other than just continue to work in the trenches and try to work day-by- day to day-by-day struggles to change people's minds. But I also feel that we need [our] people, Aboriginal teachers to start moving into the upper power structure because as teachers working within the rank and file? In the trenches? We're not going to make as big an impact as we possibly can, simply because there's just so many other teachers (refers to non-Aboriginal teachers) that are working around us that what we do, they undo.... But it's gonna take a lot of work. So, that's all for now.*

Casey has taught in different schools and has strengthened his focus to teach Native Studies in each school he has taught. He was not always supported in his quest to lobby for Aboriginal students and Aboriginal knowings. He talked about some of the lack of support stances his supervisors took toward his efforts to lobby for Native students and Native studies. Casey was also enrolled in a post baccalaureate program, a professional studies program, where he pursued his interest in Aboriginal studies in education. He has given talks and made presentations at school and university classes and conferences.

### 6.3 Sammy O t'atchanookewin

Sammy is a Métis-Ojibway woman, in her forties, who have been teaching, consulting, administrating since 1985. She started university as a mature student after her children were grown up. She originated from a northern Métis community, speaks her language quite fluently, and she is heavily involved in Aboriginal cultural activities that reflect both Meets and traditional Aboriginal perspectives. She has spent most of her adult life in the city of Winnipeg. After she graduated from her teaching degree, she talked about her fears of getting

into the work force since she had been a stay-at-home mom before she entered university.

She recalled her first teaching year as being difficult but she couldn't understand why she was feeling that something was missing, she shares these words:

> *"What's wrong here, something doesn't feel right. And, one Saturday I went to.... an Aboriginal gathering and...it was incredible, it was a sharing circle and that somehow I made the connection I realized on that day what I was missing was... I was very lonely, I felt very isolated and I felt not connected to the rest of the staff and ah but somehow I survived [my first year]".*

Sammy talked about her desire to teach in a school where she could put her 'training' to the test, like many of the participants in this study she graduated from the University of Manitoba through an Access support program where her major was 'inner city schools'. She felt that she should be able to work in inner city schools where a large number of the students were Aboriginal. *"Then I got a position at another school teaching grade two and actually I was looking forward to that experience because I was told that at least 40% of the students were Aboriginal".* At this site, she found out that after she taught her class for awhile that:

> *One of the other teachers that was teaching the same grade as mine in resource, well she...switched the cards of the names of the students so that I got most of the special Ed kids because of that. But, because I was a new teacher, people that did know [I was new] tried to support me and help me get through the year and I didn't say anything. I'm not going to say anything, I was still ah new and I didn't have my seniority yet, so I was not going to say there is something wrong here",*

She said about the students being switched into her class.

Sammy went on to state *"I was at that school for seven years and I learned that it was true the fact that Aboriginal teachers and Aboriginal programs will instill pride in Aboriginal children. And you even got the non-Aboriginal children wanting to be Aboriginal. That's what happens (nods of agreement from others and laughter)".* Sammy moved from this position after seven years and went on to another school that had a stronger Aboriginal focus in language and culture. She became a Native language and resource teacher. After being at this school for a couple of years, she took up other positions that continued to strengthen her experience in Aboriginal education. She has been called upon to make several presentations to school and university classes and conferences, and she has served on a number of committees that focus on Aboriginal education. Her career path included being a classroom teacher, both at the elementary and high school level though she was trained in elementary education in her degree. Sammy has indicated that all the while she was in teaching that she pursued an Aboriginal focus whether it was Métis culture oriented or more traditional Aboriginal culture oriented. She has struggled against the different attitudes some of her colleagues displayed that did not support her goals in Aboriginal education, still she continued to lobby, teach, advocate in this chosen career path of integrating Aboriginal perspectives into her teaching and work, and advocating for Aboriginal students. Sammy is also in

a graduate program where she is pursuing her research interests in Aboriginal curriculum development.

### 6.4 Sara *O t'atchanookewin*

Sara is a Métis-Ojibway woman who was raised in inner city Winnipeg without a strong understanding about Aboriginal culture and heritage. Once, she realized that she had Aboriginal heritage, she took the time to pursue what this meant for her. Through her educational and career experiences she was able to pursue this path even further. She said *"I have been teaching at [the same school] for 9 years now and when I when to university I went with the support of my father. We were reminded [in our grade school] often that we didn't fit now I understand".* Sara was referring to the knowledge that she now understood why they did not 'fit' into the neighbourhood where she was raised, it was because people treated her differently because of her heritage. In her quest for understanding her heritage and wanting to reclaim her cultural knowledge and historic perspectives, she went on to say:

> *[A traditional teacher] told me that I would find what I needed and I was able to go as far as I could. I always got involved in the community. When I first started teaching I was...[in a teaching a non-Aboriginal area]. Then about 4 years ago I asked to change jobs to work with Aboriginal students to teach Native studies. I worked with the students and even though I didn't know the culture I wanted to work with them. But I just woke up one day and walked to the school and figured out what I needed to figure out to teach the Native studies course. Thank goodness it was every other second day so I could go home and panic for two nights before I had to teach. But in the asking and being able to offer it [the Native studies course] I also knew that I needed to learn so I took a summer course that was a wonderful course and it really gave me a lot of strength.*

Sara has moved from her teaching site of nine years to take on another position that has an Aboriginal focus and that provides general supports to advance Aboriginal education. She is also pursuing a graduate degree where she is focusing her study interests in Aboriginal education.

### 6.5 Rachel *O t'atchanookewin*

Rachel is a Métis-Ojibway woman in her forties; She was raised in a northern Métis community. She speaks her language fluently. Rachel graduated in 1985 from the University of Manitoba, Faculty of Education and her first job was teaching math's and Native studies in an 'alternative' school where there were a lot of Aboriginal students. She tells us that *"I thought that would be a good way for me to ease into the system...by working in an [alternative] school".* These alternative school programs are classrooms of specialized classes for students, primarily Aboriginal, who struggle in mainstream classes. Rachel left this program after a couple of years to teach at another school where she was placed with math's and Native studies again. Although her degree did not include a major nor minor in Native studies, this is what she ended up teaching. Her interest was working with Aboriginal students, a choice she claims that she made for herself.

Over the years Rachel has worked in different schools with the same focus of teaching in Alternative classrooms. Sometimes when she came to a school, the

children were just placed in her classes because of her identity; a teacher who is also Aboriginal to which she stated:

> *Over the years you kind of learn, of course, you learn and you get more experience and you know how to handle these types of situations. And I think the administration learned also not to dump all those special needs kids into one area because one day I went in to say I'm going to tell you that I'm going to resigning today. They immediately moved some kids that day.*

Rachel has taught in different schools, sometimes at the request of administrators who sought her out or out of her own desire to work at different schools. She was approached to work at a school that had a strong Aboriginal focus in academic and culture. She was excited about this prospect:

> *Here was an opportunity to part of this exciting thing and going into an Aboriginal school with an Aboriginal philosophy this is historical so who would want to miss out on that? Anyway I got into [this school] the year it opened and that was the most challenging role. And so the year went on, to me it was the most incredible year! ...We did the most incredible things, things that you'd never expect to happen in the school like when we took the kids out all the time to go to [sweat lodge ceremonies] and all that.*

After teaching at the Aboriginal focussed school for awhile, Rachel held two more positions (administration) in different educational settings. She left one position because of changes to the classification, the other she left due to the stressful conditions of the position where she did not feel that she got any support for her work. She is now an administrator at a school of her choice.

## 6.6 Anna *O t'atchanookewin*

Anna is a First Nations Ojibway woman, in her forties, who is from a small northern community who speaks her language fluently. For over 10 years, she has worked in various education positions since she graduated from her education degree. She did not start off teaching in the classroom when she graduated. She holds two degrees in education at the bachelor and master's level. When she graduated from her education degree, she had a difficult time getting into a school in the city of Winnipeg where she wanted to teach. She wanted to teach in Winnipeg because she wanted her children to feel settled about where they lived. She had applied for many positions in many schools but she was always turned down due to 'lack of experience'. She could not understand why she would be expected to have experience when she had just graduated from a degree. (One comment that surfaced time and again from the participants was that there was a time that Access support students were not being hired in the Winnipeg School Division due to charges of racism.) Anna had wondered if this was the case for her too. However, in the meantime she decided to take a position at a non-formal education program where she could to teach Native languages. She worked at this position for a couple of years where she travelled across the province to support the needs for Native language programming. Although she enjoyed the work, particularly meeting with different First Nations educators and Elders in the field, she stated that *"I wanted to be a*

*classroom teacher because that is what I was trained for four years as a classroom teacher"*, so she left the position and again looked to the WSD#1 for employment. This is where her family lived so she wanted to stay there too. Anna also wanted to work in the WSD#1 because of the large numbers of Aboriginal students in attendance. This is what she had to share about her experiences in trying to get a teaching position:

> *I wanted to stay in Winnipeg because I knew that there was a large Native student population in Winnipeg and that there's gotta be a way eventually to get in. So I felt maybe I'll work for a couple of years and maybe they will see that I have some experience working with ah people in general in the languages areas. What's known out here that language programs getting off the ground and then ending. So two years later, I decided to apply to the division and I applied to all these elementary schools what I did was I developed my own resume, and the division had my resume every year. I would make sure to tell them that I really wanted a job somewhere. But it didn't get anywhere but by the third year I did something different. What I did was I took my resume around to all the different elementary schools and I made appointments with the principals. I'd go in and have meetings with them and ah I've never, when I did that when I'd go and visit the principals right in the school I never experienced so much negativity. You know it was just like this impression that or with them like, how dare you even come straight to the school and just announce yourself or just introduce yourself nobody does that! You have to go through the division! Some were willing to meet with me, some were hesitant. I'd phone and say I just want to drop off my resume, I'm very interested in working in the school where there is a large number of Aboriginal students or where there was second language programming or just anything. I told them what and where I wanted to work. There was maybe out of four principals that I met I mean I probably called about eight principals but the ones I knew wouldn't even give me a chance to go to their school. I thought well forget that I can only push so far. But, there were some [principals] that said sure, we'll interview you and we'll have a meeting. So I got interviewed at [one] school, I knew the principal there but once I got there like he was just he came down really hard on me, he said 'well, you come from a job that doesn't entail teaching whatsoever, you do have a B.Ed. degree but you have absolutely so experience working with kids'!*

This last comment was something that Anna heard often in her attempts to get into the schools. After this experience, Anna finally got a job interview that led to a position in an 'alternative' program in a school that had a high number of Aboriginal students. Unfortunately, she did not have a positive teaching experience in this school due to conflicts with colleagues around defining Aboriginal issues and content. However, she persevered in this position for two years then left to go to a northern community for a spell. When she returned to Winnipeg, she re-applied to teach in the WSD#1, and she was hired in a school where she could integrate Aboriginal perspectives into her work. When another position came up in that school that was more in tune with second and Native language instruction and programming she applied for it, but it was offered to another candidate. She felt honoured to be able to be a part of an important development in Aboriginal education but felt too that in relation to the cultural and spiritual activities that she could decide for herself how much she could chose to embrace. *"I know that I have that choice now".* Anna felt that this candidate had less experience than she did with second language instruction, so she left for another school where again the focus was Aboriginal culture and languages. She stayed in this next school for the next two years then later moved into school administration. She decided to take up administration because:

> *I feel like I had that choice [to stay in a teaching role or to take up administrative role], if I didn't want further challenges in my education career I would have just stayed as a classroom teacher maybe for 15 years whatever, but I feel that there is much more to be done in the fact*

*that there are so many Aboriginal kids in our division and there's just so few Aboriginal teachers and hardly any Administrators. Administrators were just recently hired and to me it just didn't make sense and I think it just takes a little bit of time and a lot of courage to make these things happen.*

Anna has persevered against many odds in her career path as an educator, but she has stayed focused because of her convictions to teach in areas where there was a high concentration of Aboriginal students. She tells us that she enjoys the demands of administration and recognized that she can make an impact at this level where she has more authority to advance Aboriginal perspectives in education.

### 6.7 Charlotte *O t'achcanookewin*

Charlotte is a Métis woman who is in her late thirties and she is from a northern rural community. She has taught over 10 years in various education positions, not all of which was teaching in the classroom. She taught in a number of rural schools before coming to Winnipeg. Her area of expertise was in special education, a focus that she has enjoyed. She talked about her reasons for getting into special education, a clear choice she made as she recalled her own experiences and that of her colleagues from their school days of being pushed into 'special programs' simply because they were Native. She tells us that her concern for Aboriginal kids in the school system is why she got into special education as a career choice:

*So I guess for me I made a commitment that whatever I did it would make a continuing impact on Aboriginal kids. That's why I got into special*

*ed. because that's where a lot of the kids who were supposedly delayed sort of thing would end up in special ed. They were the ones that needed the support. That's kind of where I went with the special ed. And a lot of times when you say things you'll try to advocate for the kids, you're always questioning yourself as you're teaching these kids and advocating for those kids and trying to get them a better chance at life. I went from [three northern rural community schools] (laughs), I made my way around before coming to Winnipeg. I taught junior high and that's where there seems to be, ah that's when things seem to happen to our kids, they go this way or they go that way..once they finish grade six they just fall.*

Charlotte has spent the last few years working in junior high and high schools in special education and teaching Native studies. She has enjoyed watching the students in her class as they developed more confidence in their Aboriginal heritage. Although she has enjoyed teaching, she stated that she has experienced difficulties having to resist and counter the attitudes and behaviours of mainstream teachers toward the Aboriginal students in her classes. Charlotte left the high school for another position that had a stronger Aboriginal focus in content and delivery where she is able to concentrate on curriculum planning and design. She is also enrolled in a master's of education program.

### 6.8 Beatrice *O t'atchanookewin*

Beatrice is a First Nation Cree woman in her fifties. She is originally from a small northern community. She spent a lot of her adult life in the city of Winnipeg where she entered university, as she says "late in life". She has taught for over nine years. After graduating from her degree in education, she talked about taking positions in the WSD#1 that were short term until something more

permanent came up. She was concerned that she might not get a full time position because of her age however, she did end up at an Aboriginal focussed school where she was able to integrate and work from Aboriginal perspectives. Because she entered university late in life she was concerned that she might not get a position so she was pleased when she did get into the system and she enjoys being at her present position. When she reflected upon her experiences of entering a profession late in life she stated,

> *The rest of society seems so cold sometimes? I started university so late and my career so late. When I retire at 65 I won't have the years I need for a decent pension. And I think this happens to a lot of our people? And yet I wonder if I am judging myself according to the white world.*

### 6.9 Robin O t'atchanookewin

Robin is a First Nation woman who is Ojibway from a small northern community. She was raised in the city of Winnipeg where she has worked in educational settings for over 15 years. She talked about her role in education where one of her responsibilities as an educator is to bring together parents, children and the teachers together as an educational team to tackle issues of concern to them. She has presented workshops on Aboriginal content and delivery to various schools and conferences. Robin spoke about her educational experiences and stressed how Aboriginal educators and allies must consider using our education through all its formal and informal knowings to support our career choices as educators who are willing to challenge the inequities in our

system and reclaim and assert Aboriginal heritage. She stated that we must understand that:

> *We've been through horrendous histories of colonization.... [and] I feel that my education will not be complete until I've begun to reclaim who I am as an authentic Aboriginal woman and so I feel very cheated even though I have a university degree that I wasn't accorded the opportunity to learn the ways of our ancestors, you know....*

It was for this reason that Robin feels so adamant about finding ways to help students and the Aboriginal community reconnect to their own traditions, philosophies and symbols. For her, valuing, but understanding our western immersed educational backgrounds and using our careers to advance Aboriginal perspectives is critical towards a decolonizing and reconnecting process.

### 6.10 Elsie *O t'atchanookewin*

Elsie is a First Nations Ojibway woman in her early 60's whose career path has been immersed in educational settings since the early 70's. She started teaching without a degree in the 70's so she spent her summers completing her degree in education. Elsie speaks both Ojibway and Cree languages fluently. She has taught in rural Native communities before coming to Winnipeg where she taught in inner city schools and other educational settings for over 20 years. She has been in administration for the last 10 years and feel that she is close to retirement from teaching and administration so she could take on more concentrated steps toward understanding her Aboriginal spirituality. (There were at least four of the people who participated in this study who were ready for

retirement.) When Elsie was talking about her career and spirituality, she says *"I thought about the Christian dogma and the faces of that Christian dogma and that certainly affected our culture and that certainly back home at work is that movement and some connectedness, concern and stuff, but the church threw sin in there somehow".* She continued to talk about how this concept of 'sin' has crept into our psyches and how it has affected our careers as educators straddled across two worlds and having to constantly wrestle with the conflicts between the two very different ways of thinking/being. Elsie indicated that at one time in our Aboriginal knowings, we would not have thought of certain actions as 'sin'ful since this concept is not in our language.

At the time of her teaching in the seventies she felt that she was simply pressured to follow the provincial curriculum. She has felt this struggle in her career because she was one of the handfuls of Aboriginal people who was teaching in the seventies and feeling caught up against such a mainstream system. It was difficult, then she recalled, asserting who we were as Aboriginal people let alone try to integrate Aboriginal perspectives into her teaching. Today, she feels that this is more acceptable. In sharing this insight, she tells us that:

> *My father once told me, he said 'you've now been amongst white people and you know that may not bode well for further training that you would need to go through [in Aboriginal spirituality]'. Therein I think lies my hesitancy to become actively spiritual in the Native culture. I always feel that it will require my total commitment and that the eurosystem would not allow that commitment. Who knows that maybe now that I am retiring I can start new because I certainly need to be spiritual I need to be have a spiritual community.*

Elsie has always actively advocated for Aboriginal students and supported Aboriginal knowings and practices in her school. Furthermore, she has encouraged her teachers to take issues seriously and educate themselves accordingly. She used humour in talking about her career move into administration she said:

> *I think...it's crazy, I have never been a systems person so I think they [administration] made a mistake putting me in as an administrator. I don't push a whole lot of paper. You know I never wanted to be an administrator. (laughs, as she says these words) It's that darn Vera (Vera Martin is a well known elder who has worked in the social services field, and has advocated for educational changes when she lived in Winnipeg) (in a humorously endearing way Elsie continues) I've got to get back at her somehow one of these days. She took me out for Chinese food one day and she told me 'now you go out and do what I said, I want you to apply for a job as a principal'. I didn't want to. I didn't know anything about administration, but anyway even that was a triumph in itself back in the early 80's. You know a stretch of one's self esteem if you will. 'Cause the year I got hired there was some board shenanigans going on with other ethnic groups....The board made some mistakes and the ethnic groups were never accepted with their peers and I think that the same has been true of the Aboriginal teachers...I hope that I have accomplished something, I certainly hope so ah but I know that I have learned I have had the opportunity to work with those little kids.*

She continued to talk about her ongoing concern for the Aboriginal students in the system and how they are up against the mainstream ways of doing things that don't really support them. For Elsie, having Aboriginal teachers and administrators in the system is a must for the sake of the children. She expressed a sense of urgency in her voice as she said:

> *You know what? I have worked in this non-Aboriginal system for a long time and I've learned to use some of the ways in which they operate. I said I have no skills, the young people need the protection, they're are a lot of Aboriginal people who will support them in different ways, and the*

*Mom's, they are going back to a kind of support. Even with the Aboriginal Teachers' Circle our focus is the child, the well being of the children the emphasis is the children, and we must not forget that....We have to be sensible and know how to connect them with individuals. Anyway to finish off, I haven't thought about this for quite a while but I think with Aboriginal teachers in the schools I think that the children feel more connected to them whether they are aware of it or not.*

Elsie further expressed her concern that as Aboriginal educators we have a big responsibility to protect our children and that we have a chance do this through or careers. She was pleased to see the positive changes toward a greater inclusion of Aboriginal content and delivery that Aboriginal teachers can access through their careers.

### 6.11 Raquel *O t'atchanookewin*

Raquel is a First Nation Cree woman who is in her late forties. She has been teaching well over 21 years in the WSD#1. When she was in her twenties, she went back to adult high school to finish her grade twelve then went on to college but she was not happy with her vocation. After being a stay-at-home mom for awhile she went on to pursue a degree in education at the University of Manitoba through Access supports with a focus on inner city teacher education. She, a single mom, was on welfare at the time and saw this as an opportunity to get off welfare and into something more meaningful. After she completed her degree in education she was able to teach in the WSD#1 and that is where she stayed. Raquel has held a number of teaching positions in different schools where she gained a lot of with inner city teaching experience.

She is now in administration where she has been for the past few years. During her teaching career, she has always advocated for integrating Aboriginal perspectives in her classroom and in the schools. Raquel has her master's of education degree and has contemplated going on to pursue a doctoral program in education.

When she talked about her own role in educational settings and the system, she said, *"I know its one of my roles, one of my roles in mainstream education is to ask the questions that haven't been said yet".* She continued to share her reflections about her educational experiences and the support system she developed for herself that continued into her career as an educator. She stated that,

> *Being around to support my family and Aboriginal students are the two greatest things to have contributed to whatever I have done in my career and in fact I wrote about that in my comprehensive exams. When I did my comps in my masters program. I think about this often and realize that too, I'm the first individual on the fourteen on my mother's side and their children and the fourteen on my father's side and their children to acquire a master's in any university program.*

### 6.12 Lana *O t'atchanookewin*

Lana is a Métis woman in her late forties who are originally from a northern Métis community. She has lived in the city of Winnipeg most of her adult life. She talked about how she was involved with her children's school activities and one day she was invited to apply for a position as a teacher's aide. When she worked as a teacher's aide she heard about the Winnipeg Education Centre teacher-training program, her friends and school principal encouraged her

to think about applying for admission to the program. She took some time to think about this then as she says *"I finally put my application in and I was lucky enough to be chosen and I started going there from 79 and I graduated in 83".*

When she graduated with her degree in education she promptly got a teaching position where her children were attending school. She felt fortunate to be able to teach at the same school where her children attended although she did not have them in her own classes. She said, *"...I was just lucky enough they needed a teacher at [the] school where my daughters went to school. I already had the connection...parents knew me from the school from being on parent council and the principal knew me so I was known in the school".* After many years at this school, Lana now feels ready for a move to a slightly different position where she can still work with Aboriginal resources and Aboriginal curriculum development. She shared these words,

> *I am hoping now I'm ready for the move. I made my full circle at [the school], I think I'm ready to move on if I get the job I'll really be happy. Maybe I'll be able to really develop some curriculum to be used in the classroom. And I had a lot of ideas I would really like to try out...I've applied for it [job] so hopefully I'll get an interview this coming week and I can do more of the Aboriginal content something that I'd really like to do.*

### 6.13 Barbara O t'atchanookewin

Barbara is a First Nation Ojibway woman who speaks her language fluently. She is in her early sixties and she has been an educator for over 30 years. She is from a First Nation community that she left when she was a young woman, after her return from residential schooling. Barbara has lived with her

family in the city of Winnipeg for most of her adult life. She said that she left her 'reserve' because she wanted something better for herself and her children, so she came to Winnipeg where she raised her children with her husband. After her children were grown, she decided to go to university to study. She obtained her degree then went off to work in a number of educational settings across the province and in the city of Winnipeg.

She has held a number of positions that spanned from being a k-12 and university classroom teacher to administration. Some positions she left due to conflict regarding a strong mainstream focus on the curriculum instruction, content and delivery where there were a lot of Aboriginal students had difficulties in trying to convince the administration that a more culturally relevant curriculum ought be taking place. One position she took was with the department of Indian Affairs where she thought that she might be able to make an impact on the kinds of educational supports they provided. This proved to be a source of major discontent for her health as well as the culturally inappropriate ways she felt that the system operated under. She reflected on this move to Indian Affairs and said:

> *After [teaching in a First Nation community school] I went to what I thought was furthering my career. I went with the Department of Indian and Northern Affairs Canada (DIAND). Well, that became a thorn in my side. I came out of there with ulcers! That was the worse time of my career. I was accepted as, ah you know they have the brightest of those they select for positions nowadays? Well I was selected to go into Administration to be trained as the administrator and eventually become the superintendent that sort of thing. So, I worked there for two years and went to university [Master's of education program] for a couple of*

*years all the while being tied to you know a bureaucracy well that was the worse time of my life.*

Barbara finally left DIAND when she realized that her health was at risk. Since leaving Indian Affairs, which had been an eye opener for her regarding how Eurocentric it was regarding policies and practices, she realized that she needed to advocate for a more culturally relevant curriculum through her work. So, she went back into teaching for awhile then became an administrator at a school that had a strong Aboriginal focus. She was pleased when she became the administrator at this school and with the kind of things she was able to do there:

*I became the [administrator]. I didn't set out to be the administrator, I wanted to be a part of the staff (laughs). But somehow or other the Creator had other plans for me. That part of my career became my most challenging and my most fulfilling because I felt that during that time I was suddenly thrust into, you know, having to look to my culture directly.*

Even though Barbara enjoyed the challenges at this school, she felt that after a few years of contributing her time, expertise and energy she felt that it was time to move again. Since she left her administrative position, she has held three other positions that had to do with Aboriginal education in different educational settings where she was invited to apply for the work because of her extensive background in the field.

### 6.14 Ellen *O t'atchanookewin*

Ellen is a First Nation Ojibway Woman in her mid thirties. She was raised in Winnipeg's inner city area where her parents moved for economic reasons.

She speaks her language with some fluency and understands it very well. She has been an educator for over 15 years and has worked in inner city schools and across the province in positions that had an Aboriginal focus.

She went to community college after high school and took up a technical course and worked in this field for a few months after she graduated, however, she was not satisfied with the work and focus. She then worked as a teacher's assistant in a school because as she stated, *"...I was always involved with the school. I worked as a teacher's assistant for four years and I worked in a small school and the principal who hired me was actually my own principal when I was a student in junior high".*

She went on to say that her sister was a student in the Winnipeg Education Centre teacher training project at the same time Ellen was a teacher's assistant. Her sister convinced her to apply for admission to teacher training, which Ellen did. She reflected upon why she went to study and stated, *"...I knew about the Winnipeg Education Centre because my sister went there, and I knew that there were other university sites that were in existence but I guess my parents did not go to university, like their highest education was grade two".* Ellen wanted to be able to tackle an area that matched her interest and make the most of the experience so she completed her degree and went promptly into schools where she could teach and integrate Aboriginal perspectives. After spending some time teaching in schools, Ellen went to another educational setting where she could continue to advance Aboriginal education. Ellen has

started a Master of education program; something she feels will only enhance her career choices.

### 6.15 Barry *O t'atchanookewin*

Barry is a First Nation Cree man from Northern Manitoba who is in his forties. He has been an educator well over 10 years. He speaks his language with proficiency and has taught Native languages in schools and other settings. He has a degree in education and has taken courses in the post baccalaureate program. Barry is a strong advocate of the preservation and promotion of Native language and culture.

Similar to Elsie's experience, Barry is supportive of Aboriginal traditions and philosophies and practices but he has not included them in any great degree in his work and personal life. He is working on sorting out how these fit with his experiences with Christianity. Although, he did not speak directly about his career experiences I share what I know about him as he shared his story in the sharing circles too.

### 6.16 Bert *O t'atchanookewin*

Bert is a Métis-Ojibway man in his forties whose career in education spans over 25 years. Bert is from a small northern community. He has held various positions in educational sites over the years from being a teacher in rural Aboriginal communities to an adult educator in urban settings. He has worked in

sites primarily where there was a large population of Aboriginal students whether it was for children or adults. Bert has worked in both formal and non-formal sites of learning. Bert sees his career as an opportunity to serve his people as reflected in these words:

> *I work for the benefit of Aboriginal people whenever I work. I started working at a young age after I got my B.A. and B. Ed, something unusual for Aboriginal people back then [in the 70's]....I've worked as a teacher in schools in the north and in the city but most of the time I work for short-term projects. I often wonder why, but then I realize that this is the place I can really work with the 'underdog'. These are the places where [our] people often need the most help and this is where I've had the most negative experiences as an Aboriginal person willing to work from an Aboriginal perspective.*

Bert is enrolled in a Master's of education program and he is working with high school students at the time of this writing. He dedication is evident from the number of committees and community functions to which he volunteers his time and energy.

# CHAPTER 7

## *Atchanookewina* (stories)

## IN THE CIRCLE OF UNEASY RELATIONS: RACIAL/CULTURAL DIFFERENCES

### 7.1 Sammy O t'atchanookewin

Sammy, a Métis-Ojibway woman talked about many experiences that were related to her being "different" from the mainstream students and colleagues. She acknowledged that she was an Aboriginal person working in primarily mainstream surroundings, with mainstream curriculum challenges and with colleagues, some of whom made comments that reflected racism, stereotypes, and ignorance. She was reflecting on the stages of her understanding of her Aboriginality when she made this comment:

> *I did not learn to be ashamed of my Aboriginal heritage until I moved to Winnipeg.....it was at that time I began to experience racism. At [grade] school I was called a ------Indian...I guess the more and more I learn about my culture the more that I don't stay on the personal and it makes me stronger and I always think about the time when I used to be ashamed of being an Indian...because I always felt that I'm an Indian, the kids, everybody [noticed]..And I what I like about today is that I'm not ashamed of being an Indian that is where I have grown...*

It is interesting to note here that Sammy uses the word 'Indian' as a way of referring to herself in sharing her thoughts. Sammy otherwise defines herself as Métis and her community and culture of origin is primarily Métis. It is usual practice to refer to the term 'Indian' when talking about oneself because that is

the word that is commonly used to refer to Aboriginal peoples regardless of their cultural affiliation or Aboriginal grouping. Also, I submit that it is because of the 'Indian' or 'Aboriginal' heritage that is usually the focus of 'difference' and the older usage the term 'Indian' as commonly accepted still emerges in many conversations where reference to Aboriginal identity is discussed. When Sammy spoke about how her colleagues treated her she made these comments:

> *Because this teacher next door to me had too many students, so it was an extra class for me. And I was the only Aboriginal teacher and ah one of the things I remember, I don't know, I'm a person that always comes from here (points to her heart) like all the time no matter what I do, it comes from here (points to her heart) like I expect people to treat me... like I treat them I guess. I expect people to ah you know care about me, make me feel that I belong? And that's where I always come from and I didn't feel like that when I was at that school.*

Sammy asked for a transfer to another school after this experience. In relating to the kinds of expectations Sammy believes are placed on Aboriginal teachers, Sammy had this to say:

> *And the other thing I wanna say is, and I don't know if other Aboriginal teachers notice this one, but if you're an Aboriginal teacher and you have to be better than average. Like non-Aboriginal teachers in my opinion they can [get away with] just being average teachers and people will say that's a good teacher. But...for me as an Aboriginal teacher, you have to be above average, you have to be a good [emphasis] teacher before the non-Aboriginal staff will respect you...it's not that I generalize. There are some non-Aboriginal staff which became friends of mine and they helped me. We helped each other. But that's an expectation generally speaking that Aboriginal teachers have to better than average.*

There are scholars who have written about this notion of having to do better than the average just because of one's difference (Dei, 1998; Hampton,

1993; Lee, 1985). I submit that this is the idea that was operating here when Sammy was talking about her experiences and her observations.

Sammy continued to talk about some experiences with racism that she experienced in her workplace. *"Some of the racism I guess that I encountered were...around that same time one of the principal's was saying, you know, you have to work around the multicultural curriculum. She was encouraging the staff to do that, especially Aboriginal staff because there were lot of problems with racist remarks"*. She continued to share a specific incident that still bothers her to this day, at that time she couldn't put an understanding, an analysis to what was happening, although she was able to understand why only after becoming more aware about issues around "difference", she stated:

> *You know I was sitting in the staff lounge one day and a couple of the white teachers were colouring some pictures of children and they were going to use them in the classroom and...one of them made a joke to other one saying something about 'we should colour this face brown just like what the principal wants us to do' and they were laughing in a taunting way like it was a big joke! That why would they even want to colour the picture brown because it would represent an Aboriginal person, hey? These were professionals, teachers! And at that time I didn't really know what that was. All I knew was that that doesn't feel right. I don't know. How can they do that? I was so embarrassed and ashamed like I know that they were making fun of me being an Indian like when I experienced that but I really didn't understand what that was? And so I didn't do anything at the time and they actually looked at me, and then they looked at each other, and they seemed to realize that they did something they shouldn't have. But I didn't say anything. Like they <u>knew</u> and I knew but we just ignored it.*

For Sammy, ignoring this and other incidents was difficult because she knew that there was something not right, but she just couldn't understand what it was. It

was only after becoming more aware by taking courses and talking to colleagues about these incidents that she tells us she started to challenge them.

There were other incidents that Sammy brought to this conversation where the incidents reflected racist and stereotyped attitudes and behaviours towards Aboriginal parents and students. When she was talking about programmed home visits to the homes of Aboriginal parents in inner city communities, and going into the home alone Sammy said:

> *The other [white] teachers would not go into the community unless they absolutely had to, and then they would go in twos! I guess, they didn't trust "those Indians"! (She gestured quotation marks with her fingers when she said 'those Indians' and there were gasps of astonishment and laughter from the circle members)". ('Those Indians' was a term Sammy used when referring to the parents and in Sammy's attempt at being facetious to make a point about mainstream attitudes toward Aboriginal people.)*

Sammy refers to yet another experience she had with a custodian who was working in the same school:

> *There were two custodians talking to each other and one day one of them came in [to the staff room] and just loudly shouted 'you could tell they got their cheques again, they're all carrying cases of 24s on their shoulders' that's what he said. He was referring to the people who were walking by the school. Anyway, by then I learned that, that was a racist comment and it wasn't appropriate.*

Sammy was now able to assess the situation for it's racist comments and decided to do something about it. *"I went to the head custodian and I told him what I heard. He said to me, 'you know I've been telling him that he should be watching what he says but I'll talk to him again'. I was pleased that now I could at least take stand up to something that I felt was not right in the situation".*

Sammy she heard so many comments at different times, some of which she was able to take up and challenge. One other incident she had was with a resource teacher who had control over distribution of the bus tickets when Sammy was trying to garner support in the form of bus tickets for a parent who wanted to join in a demonstration against education and program cuts:

> *the resource teacher said something that just totally shocked me, she said 'well, if they [Aboriginal parents] have money to buy beer they can money to buy bus fare' (a gasp of disgust came from the group) and like I was just taken aback. Like I would have expected another teacher to say something like that, like those teachers with the colouring incident, but I never expected her to say something like that....So anyway, those are some of my experiences in the first seven years of teaching. One of the things I thought...before I became a teacher, if I encountered racism you know what I would do? I would quit my job. And when I went into education and when I became a teacher I said to myself, you know I worked long and hard to get here and there is no way they'll chase me out of here that's what I would say to myself now when I encounter racism. And I just want to end by saying that I know that I talked about some of the experiences I had in those first seven years but I also want to reiterate that there was some people [teachers]there that supported me and I could accomplish being a good teacher they were always supporting me in this and that activity. So there were people in the system non-Aboriginal that helped and supported me even though there was the racism that would go on. Any, I guess now I know what it is and..sometimes I would still confront it but I'm willing to do something about. Now I know how to deal with it....I have the courage [things] and it stops people. I guess that's all I have for now.*

### 7.2 Bert O t'atchanookewin

Bert has always attempted to find ways to teach and work from an Aboriginal perspective. It took him some time to realize that his way of teaching seemed different from that of his mainstream colleagues but he just kept to himself and worked in the best way he could with his students. However, he

commented: *"Anything I did from an Aboriginal perspective was met with resistance....I felt isolated".* There were many times when he would have liked the support of his administrators for his work but the support was rarely, if ever, forthcoming. He went on to state that he felt that there were *"lots of hang ups in using Aboriginal models. People still feel like they have to use the status quo perspective".* Bert related that this attitude of non-acceptance of Aboriginal models came from both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people. Cole, a member of the In-SHuck-Ch Nation of BC (2000) writes of this dilemma in his doctoral dissertation, "First Peoples Knowings as Legitimate Discourse in Education: Coming Home to the Village". For Bert, this is a form of racism where Aboriginal models and ways of teaching could easily be ignored and dismissed simply because it was not a part of the curriculum, or as he said, the *"status quo".* He expressed his satisfaction that there are some positive changes happening in the curriculum today.

When he worked in adult education settings, Bert shared his concern that Aboriginal students have *"learned to be helpless"* and getting them beyond the basics is such a struggle. He stated *"My...experience with adult [education] is where students need to be comfortable that they can feel confident that they can do things. They have learned helplessness. They need to be able to feel they have succeeded at something",* and not to take on the internalized attitudes of learned helplessness.

Bert spoke about his own social interaction patterns with his colleagues where he never really felt a part of the group. *"Sometimes, I feel isolated when I am in a staff room for teachers. I end up being the only Aboriginal person, and the others [teachers] are socializing with each other but they don't really include me".* Bert thought that his difference as an Aboriginal person who openly advocates for Aboriginal students and perspectives sometimes kept other teachers from accepting him as an equal.

### 7.3 Sandra O t'atchanookewin

Sandra indicated that she did not feel she experienced racism herself. I wonder if she thinks about the processes of internalized racism when she is working with students. This is something that she is likely experiencing without knowing that she is. In other words, this could be an example of the kind of internalized racism and denial of racism that Dei, (1996) and Haig-Brown (1995) discussed.

Sandra referred to a conversation she had with one of her colleagues who talked about the biases in the curriculum that served primarily mainstream interests. She said how her colleague had pointed out that the kind of racism that occurred in the curriculum is that of exclusion, or stereotyping when inclusion does take place. These ideas were all new to her and she said she was willing to try to understand what that all meant. One point she did refer to that indicated that racism was prevalent was when her colleagues found out that she

was Métis they would act differently. "*.... there were occasionally a few teachers that I came across...if they found out that you are Métis, well they figure that your education is not as good as mine, where did you get yours"?* She would get grilled and questioned by her colleagues who seemed to feel justified in their actions. Sandra was surprised at the attitudes that her colleagues displayed and she said that she found herself trying to explain that *"her education was just as good as theirs"*, and that being Aboriginal didn't mean that her degree was substandard. Upon reflecting on her own experiences, she did comment that *"maybe this is like racism?"*. Perhaps, Sandra was beginning to 'see' what racism is and how prevalent it probably is in her life. This was one attitude that surfaced during many ATC meetings when discussions ensued around racism and hiring and the perceptions that the degrees the Aboriginal teachers worked so hard to get might be viewed as substandard, merely because they were supported through affirmative action programs.

### 7.4 Casey O t'atachanookewin

Casey talked about a lot of incidents that surfaced in his experiences as a teacher. Some of these were attitudinal, other were blatant acts of racism. He indicated that he got to be known in his school as being "*...a person who's seeking justice who was seeking equality and opportunities for all students, but especially Aboriginal students and I think in my quest for seeking that and I think that and I have been told this by a number of people...".* Casey went on to talk

about the fact that his own behaviour of up front advocacy had *"alienated some people in the process"*. He was adamant about the fact that his colleagues needed to learn respect toward Aboriginal knowings, practices and students. He shared his concern that some of his colleagues making a good salary but still acting in racist ways. Casey shared the following:

> *Right now they [colleagues]...are being paid more in deduction than I take home, but yet who do have the job and yet they do just incredibly racist things! For example, we had a Pow Wow just last Friday and Saturday and one of the teachers said 'You know the problem with these Pow Wow singers is that they are still trying to find the words from last year's Pow Wow' (circle members gasped and moaned to show their horror). Another joke! ....and these jokes are told in front of students and in front of us in the staff rooms, like this so-called joke 'You have a n-----, you have an Indian, who's driving the car? The cop is' And these are the jokes that are told openly inside the school! And it hurts me, but yet I am in a position where I can only speak out and as a result of speaking out I am alienating myself amongst these people but at the same time I don't really particularly care simply because there's not a lot of respect there.*

So Casey takes the chances of being alienated from his colleagues and continues to speak out on behalf of the students, and speaks out against racism in the hallways, staff rooms etc. These are difficult relations to maintain in the face of how difference gets taken up with his colleagues.

(Sometimes when we sat in circle and went through the sharing one round, I opened the circle up to give people the opportunity to ask for further clarifications, elaboration's and feedback about the experiences.) It was at this point that Casey shared similar experiences to those of Sara's when the conversation centred around Aboriginal students' experiences and the need to advocate on their behalf. Casey acknowledged that there were times that the

students were asked to do things to give of themselves simply because they were Aboriginal even though *"they might not have the background knowledge to support what they might have been asked to do".* For example, sometimes Casey's students got asked to act, as *"ambassadors"* to *"show"* that there are *"good things"* happening in the schools. (A 'show and tell Indianness' - a form of stereotyping we must guard against!)

On one occasion he was told to get a few of his students together to talk to the media about their perceptions toward the 'residential school experiences' (this is the time that the truth about residential school experiences were unravelling and getting out through the media). Casey said he resisted because he did not want to *"put students on the stand"* when they may not know about these experiences or have an informed opinion about them. However, Casey's said his administrator insisted that he must follow through with this request. Casey said that he challenged his superiors about the way in which students were paraded, and *"to this day"* Casey said, *"they [administrators and teachers] don't think highly of my comments. They do it all the time...You know in reality we [our schools] are presenting an image [that something is happening in Aboriginal education].... And all we are doing is reproducing inequities...".* However, much to his disappointment, Casey did abide by the request to have some Aboriginal students interviewed but he prepped them before they were interviewed so that they would know to answer only those questions they felt they could answer.

### 7.5 Barry O t' atchanookewin

Barry is a soft-spoken man who has that manner of gentleness and kindness when he speaks. He told us that he is not comfortable with issues around conflicts of any kind. He indicated that he strives to maintain a peaceful atmosphere wherever he goes. When the circle members shared their perspectives on their experiences that had to do with racism, stereotyping, conflicts, and such he related his own story. This is what he had to say:

> *One of the major things that happened in my schools was something said by one of the principals in my school. There were three of us there, Aboriginal teachers, and the principal made a comment in front of the all of us staff and said 'We're going to make one of these teachers leave before the school is over'!* (Barry was referring to the Aboriginal teachers present at the meeting he spoke about)

When Barry made this statement there were expressed gasps of disbelief and horror from the circle participants, and people inserted their questions and asked for clarification that reflected this question "*The principal said that to you*"? Rudy replied:

> *Yes, I didn't know what to say. I just sat there. That comment didn't really dawn on me about how bad it was till a couple of years after it happened. I just wanted to do my work, to teach. I knew that a lot of people didn't trust us [Aboriginal teachers] but I didn't expect to hear something like that come from a principal.*

After this statement, Barry talked about leaving that school after the year was finished but not before as that principal so had the audacity to predict! He went on to tell us that he went to other schools and that he does enjoy teaching and loves working with the little children that he teaches. He teaches at the

elementary level and has been able to integrate Native languages and content in his work, which is something he welcomes.

### 7.6 Sara O t'atchanookewin

Sara spoke about how she wanted to teach Native Studies but she felt that she did not have the background knowledge. Although she is Aboriginal, she did not have the confidence that the knowings from her community and her own knowings as an Aboriginal person are places from which she can work. It is likely that she felt that there must be a certain type of knowledge that one can gain from university in order to be able to teach Native Studies. Sara made a request to her "superiors" to teach Native Studies, to which she was given the permission so she did the research and preparation for her course. However, she never thought that teaching in this field would become a problem for her colleagues, but when other *"white teachers found out that she was teaching the course"* and that she was Aboriginal Sara said,

> *I've...also noticed that from the time that I started teaching that course, different people I worked with and administrators' relationships have changed. Where, before, I never thought for a second when I should or shouldn't talk and share my passion about the course and the students? I never thought twice about how these people thought, what would they say, how they would react. And now, there are people who have distanced themselves from me now that I am seen and I teach half time now in the Native Studies course and I work part time in support services...*

This is certainly one case where an individual whose identity was not immediately visible as being "Aboriginal". That is, Sara was probably perceived as a someone who is fair skinned and could pass as "white". It was not until Sara

asserted her identity as 'Aboriginal' and worked from 'Aboriginal knowings', and advocated for Aboriginal students when her colleagues suddenly took notice and began to shun her. I submit that this is because someone is fighting on behalf of the Aboriginal students who are otherwise at the mercy of a culturally irrelevant curriculum and biased professionals who have power over the students. To have to acknowledge that our curriculum is still fraught with inequities and racism is a difficult thing to admit to. But it is something that needs to happen and people like Sara and other Aboriginal teachers risk losing collegial supports in the process.

Sara continued to talk about how she *"stuck her neck out"* to advocate for the Aboriginal students whom her colleagues looked upon as *"lost causes"*. These same students were suddenly doing well in her classes and they were showing enthusiasm for their studies. Sara's colleagues got wind of this fact. Their curiosity got the best of them so they would approach Sara and her colleagues questioned how could the students do so well? Sara challenged her colleagues by asking, *"Why? Didn't you expect that [they would do well?]"*. Sara further stated that *"The relationships became hard on me. Our relationships have changed because the teachers think that Native students can't do well and they are surprised when they do"*.

Sara related another story about a teacher who commented that some students were involved in a gang. When Sara asked the teacher how he came to this conclusion he told her that he saw the students hanging out in the hallway

with other Aboriginal students. She said, "*...that's the only bases he used. The Students were Aboriginal*". Sara then talked about how she engaged the teacher in a conversation. The teacher went on to say that he did indeed speak to the students who were in the hallways and asked them why they weren't in classes. The student's relayed to Sara that their teachers didn't really care anyhow. The teacher went on to lecture them on how the other teachers and students (meaning white) might view them as gang members. Sara was angered about this assumption. She said that she told this to the teacher and asked him, "*would he ever speak to white kids hanging out in the same way*"? Sara then told him how those kinds of perceptions hurt the Aboriginal students.

In this situation it is clear that Sara was advocating for students who were treated unfairly because of their difference. Sara shared another story that reflected her coming to the defence of the Aboriginal students in her school because no one else was there to stand up for them when it was needed. She related a couple more stories in which she claims that the acts of racism happened simply because the students were Aboriginal! It seemed to Sara that her colleagues felt justified in their perceptions and actions and she saw this as unfair. She stated that these kinds of things happen a lot. She further related that students approach her often and disclose information that reflects racist incidents. Speaking with passion in her voice, she stated,

> *I'm hearing the kids tell me about the incidents they encounter in the halls, with teachers. The teachers make it very clear about what they think about our children. And when I go to the [administrator's] office and they are saying things without realizing what they are saying. And so it is*

*at every single level and it is every day! It is in so many ways, isn't it any wonder that our kids cannot make it?*

Sara reflected upon the things that have happened to her since she started using her voice to stand up on behalf of herself and the Native students. She said that it got to the point that "*...as I become more questioning and more vocal, I can see the faces of the teachers in the staff room shut down.*"*...yes, like [Sammy] said. I do have allies too*". Sara wanted to assure the circle members that not all the teachers acted in unfair and racist ways, but for her many of them did and she was witness to their behaviours.

### 7.7 Rachel O t'atchanookewin

Rachel's first teaching job after getting her degree in education was to teach Math and Native Studies at an alternative school. She said, "*...getting into an alternative school was...a good way to ease me into the system*". She did however reflect upon the wisdom of this decision based on feedback she got from community members,

> *...anyway, the comments that I heard from the community, from Aboriginal People, was that are we being ghettoized? We were being ghettoized by being put into these programs...and the question was why didn't they allow Aboriginal teachers to go into the mainstream to show that we are capable just doing what other teachers do...?*

Rachel echoed the concerns that were being posed by the community that recently graduated Aboriginal teachers just were not getting hired. (There were times that the ATC had challenged the system regarding the non-hiring of Aboriginal teachers who had graduated from the Winnipeg Education Centre

teacher education program.) Rachel's comments reflected this concern. Rachel said, *"I wanted to try out a regular classroom...so that's what I did, I went into a regular grade seven classroom where I would be teaching math's and again because I was the only Aboriginal teacher I was expected to teach Native Studies?"* She ended her statement with a question that indicated that she was questioning the decision made that she teach Native Studies. Rachel wanted to make it clear that she had no problem teaching Native Studies but the problem she had was the expectation simply because she was Native that she teach the classes. When one of the circle members asked if she majored in Native Studies, Rachel's answered:

> *No, I never took a Native Studies course...I don't know if I was frightened or insecure maybe about teaching Native Studies, because I never considered myself an expert and a lot of what I was dealing with back then when I think about it was the image that I had about myself, my self-esteem and so on...wasn't really that positive.*

She reiterated that she was asked to teach the class just because she was Native!

Like the other Aboriginal teachers, Rachel was concerned about the wellbeing of her Aboriginal students who were not treated with the kind of respect she perceived that mainstream students got. *"And no one else (reference to mainstream teachers) in school every got that mix of kids because when they went into the regular classrooms they were all divided. But when they came to Native Studies they were all lumped in there together".* Rachel agreed to work with the Aboriginal students and she asked that the classes be kept to a

minimum size for maximum "effectiveness". Rachel did not stay at this school that she considered to be very mainstream in its approach and staff, furthermore she was convinced that no *"Aboriginal teacher would be able to move in more responsibilities".*

Rachel talked briefly about being in one school where she did not feel accepted by her colleagues who questioned her identity as an Aboriginal person. Rachel never questioned her identity because she knew her community, culture and language to which she was well immersed. She felt the reasons her colleagues must have felt this way had to do with her being light-skinned and some that did not know her well did not believe that she was Aboriginal. Although, she spoke her language with fluency and she has a strong Métis heritage, and she comes from a rural Métis community this was not immediately apparent to those she did not know, because as she said,

> *All they saw was my light-skin...and for me it was worse...when my rival for a position was telling people that I really wasn't Aboriginal and that I was faking it and you know and that I was just doing that to promote myself. And...I've had a bit of that and once people know that I'm Aboriginal they don't really try to question it. But for me it was worse getting accepted by mainstream as an Aboriginal person. The one thing that I have going for me is that I do come from a Métis community, that helps, and if you understand the language, people can't deny that.*

Rachel is clear about her identity and for her it was never an issue as to who she was. What she felt uncertain about, at times, was that she was expected to know everything about being Aboriginal: history, culture, language, issues etc than she did when she entered her career and she was expected to

somehow magically include these into her classes even though she did not 'study' or 'major' in this field during her university career.

(I pondered about this issue of questioning one's identity based on 'looks' and I wondered if more of the participants might talk about that because it seemed to be a prevalent issue when we have had different discussions about issues that affected us, such as at the ATC meetings and gatherings. One of these issues tended to centre on being Aboriginal and the different meanings it had depending on whom you spoke to. However, the topic did not emerge as much I thought it might. Perhaps it was because other issues were more urgent as the participants spoke about their experiences.)

### 7.8 Anna O t'atchanookewin

Anna, did not get a teaching position immediately after she graduated. She recalled the year that she graduated with her cohort group of colleagues, she said, "*Of the 15 of us that had graduated, I think 3 got jobs and they were all the non-Aboriginal students that got the jobs. So, all of us that were Aboriginal did not get jobs in the division. That's where it started, right?*. She was directing her words to one circle members present who was her graduate cohort and she was referring to the fact that non-of the Aboriginal graduates of education got hired that one year. This is the year that a community group of Aboriginal people challenged the WSD#1 regarding the non-hiring of Aboriginal graduates. (To give credit, just a little, to the school division, they did take this

situation somewhat seriously because after that more hiring of Aboriginal graduates took place.)

As I mentioned earlier, Anna was one of the few Aboriginal graduates that did not get hired right after her degree and she felt that racism had a lot to do with her not being hired. When she was finally offered a position, she found that she was asked to take a class and teach the Arts and Crafts beadwork. She wondered if that was why she was hired. *"Did they assume that because I was Aboriginal that she would know how to do these things?"* Anna was relieved that she knew how to do this work and she did enjoy her work but the question nagged her.

> *I guess deep down inside I thought well is this why they are hiring me? Are they only hiring me to do arts and crafts beadwork and stuff like that? Although I enjoyed doing that but anything beyond that wasn't offered to me...I just learned to accept that so I ended up staying at that school for two years.*

Anna was glad to just get 'into the system'. Therefore, she stayed at this school until something else came up. Again, she wanted to make clear that she wasn't objecting to teaching Arts and Crafts beadwork; she was objecting to being "pigeon-holed", just because she was Aboriginal? A form of ghettoized stereotyping that Rachel spoke about? Anna reminded us that she wanted to get into the school because a large number of Aboriginal students attended there. When she did get into this school she became aware of the lack of supports that she felt the Aboriginal students got. She felt that she had to advocate for them. She also felt that because the majority of the students were Aboriginal they

didn't get the kind of supports they needed, and the students were just *"ignored"* because of the attitude that they will 'drop out' anyway. She felt helpless and in retrospect she felt that she wished she could have done more to connect with other support systems to work with the youth. She left this school because of the feeling of isolation and disconnection to the students and the other staff.

Anna had applied for several positions but she met with a lot of resistance. Because she had just returned from rural settings she felt that some administrators assumed that she didn't have 'inner city' experience when, in fact, she did. She finally got a teaching job in a school where there was one other Aboriginal person who made it clear that she was not going to lead or participate in any Aboriginal cultural activities. According to Anna, this other Aboriginal teacher did not want to identity with Aboriginal knowings and practices. Her colleagues felt that she should just be able to work in the mainstream, and bring in her Aboriginality! Therefore, once again Anna was asked to take up anything that had an Aboriginal focus. She expressed her concern that her Aboriginal colleague did not want this focus and was not interested in developing the focus so she said "*So I thought on the one hand I didn't want to be seen as a token Indian, then I thought of it in different ways and I thought to myself, yeah, why not? I want to organize something that reflects an Aboriginal perspective here because I thought if I don't do it, it just won't happen*".

Anna continued to teach and develop extra curricular Aboriginal cultural activities in this school until she left for another position. When Anna was in a

position to integrate Aboriginal perspectives she recalled how many of her colleagues, including herself were not:

> *...really trained for it, that's the thing, I wasn't trained to teach grade nine and ten English language arts from an Aboriginal Perspective. You know I wasn't trained to do that in my university training...in spite of the lack of background in teaching, we did it anyhow. There was a lot of evening and weekend time used to prepare our work. Our families suffered too but we did it.*

Anna talked about the stresses of developing a field of study that wasn't a part of their training but that it was expected of the Aboriginal teachers who wanted to work from Aboriginal knowings and practices.

This kind of expectation that is placed on Aboriginal professionals when they enter certain fields was a prevalent issue in our discussions. It emerged time and again where participants felt that certain tasks were expected of them mostly because they were Aboriginal, not because they were Aboriginal and had the "training" in the "discipline". I posit that this is when our 'difference' gets taken for granted for the purpose of getting the system off the hook by making it look like they are doing something worthwhile when there is an Aboriginal person present: something "Aboriginal" be it programming, cultural work, teaching, educating must be happening from this "expert". When, in fact, most Aboriginal graduates did not have the kind of "training" in their university experience to do this kind of work. It just became a part of their career development and this is a sort of stress that is placed on the backs of Aboriginal educators. It is important to note that once the educators gained some confidence and skill to carry out the work, they took on the challenges. When

they gained the confidence and understood the knowledge and the skills to include from Aboriginal knowings and practices, it was something they sought to include into their teaching. I submit that this is different from wanting to work in sites where there are a large number of Aboriginal students because the initial goal would seem to be that the educators might want to play a supportive and advocacy role on behalf of the students without realizing all the other expectations that might come with that territory.

### 7.9 Charlotte O t'atchanookewin

Charlotte started her sharing by talking about her high school years where she recalled incidents of racism directed at her and her friends and relatives. She remembers going to school cafeterias where white kids would direct racist slurs at her and her group of friends. They endured a lot of this kind of behaviour throughout her high school years. This, she said made her want to go into education so that she could challenge the inequities and racism that existed. Even as she struggled to get into university, she recalled her school counsellors trying to stream her into other occupations because they assumed Charlotte wouldn't be able to handle university because of where she came from (a small Métis community) and because of who she was (Aboriginal). She applied to university with support from an Access Program to get her teaching degree. For the first time in her schooling/educational life, she felt that her Aboriginal background was supported through the rough university years because of the

access supports and because she was learning alongside other Aboriginal students.

When she got her first teaching job though she said *"...that [support system] ended abruptly because you are put into a situation where you are the only Aboriginal person on staff and everybody looks at you. Especially when they find out that you are Aboriginal."* Charlotte further shared that the other teachers avoided *"too much contact with her"* once they found out that she was Aboriginal. This is interesting because Charlotte is light skinned and could pass as white if she wanted to avoid the exclusive/racist behaviours. However she was raised by a strong and proud Métis community and family, so she chose to be out with her Aboriginality and she paid through the way she was treated by her white colleagues. Charlotte persevered in this position because, it was the connections she made with the Aboriginal members in the community that made her work worthwhile and that she could work with their kids. She felt that the other teachers thought that there was everything wrong with the kids because of their Aboriginal background. She made a commitment to work with them every chance she got so she immersed her work into Special Education because *"that's where a lot of [Aboriginal] kids.... that needed the supports".* It was not that Charlotte agreed that these kids should be in special education, but because of the disproportionate numbers of Aboriginal students in special education, she felt that was the place to advocate on their behalf. Charlotte ended up advocating for the kids many times while she worked at this position. She has hope that

*"someday our kids will find value in themselves...it's important to have self-esteem".* She indicated that being Aboriginal shouldn't be a painful experience because we are in learning sites and that we must find ways to encourage our students and teachers to gain pride in our heritage, cultures and difference of being Aboriginal.

### 7.10 Beatrice O t'atchanookewin

Beatrice was raised in a small mixed White and Aboriginal community where she went to school. She recalled that she never felt either a part of the neighbouring First Nations community where her mother was from and who was bureaucratically ousted due to the discrimination in the Indian Act against Indian women who married non-Indian men. As a result of this ousting, Beatrice and her siblings were raised in a neighbouring community. She never felt like she belonged in this community which was more evident when she was in school where her schoolmates made her feel like she was an outsider. So there were two places where she didn't feel like she belonged: the community of her mother (though she felt connected to her grandparents) and the community of the school. However, when she entered university as a mature student and got her teaching degree late in her life in her mid-40's and ended up teaching at an Aboriginal focussed school *she "found a bit of connection with culture. I guess being a status Métis, you know as a kid I didn't feel like I belonged there in the school in my community and I didn't belong to the reservation. I belong to my*

*mom's people. I thought wasn't racism but now I don't know. Were we always sort oppressed*? It is interesting to note here that Beatrice was now starting to see that these earlier experiences were related to racism and oppression because of their Aboriginal identity. She is now finding ways to reconnect to her Aboriginal relations and ways that help sustain her in her career. I have observed her working in her work site, meetings and at conferences where she certainly displays the behaviours that challenge racism and promote pride in being Aboriginal, and that this sort of 'difference' doesn't have to be painful.

> *Beatrice also spoke about the perceptions the mainstream seemed to have about Aboriginal based programming and activities that occurred. She said that reporters usually made their way to 'get a story'. And I used to find that sometimes the CBC (communication media), like we'd be in the library we would be visiting you know. Well you know some of the juggling behind the scenes, what it seemed like they were saying or thinking? Wow these Indians, in this [Aboriginal programming], they're all in green skin or maybe we want to see the colour of their skin it was just a really weird feeling like we were on all the time! And that seemed so really stressful!*

Beatrice talked about some issues around who should decide who is Native when it came to program development and such. She thought these this kind of thinking was counterproductive to getting the work done and if individuals wished to self-identified then so be it and that it was up to them to develop that kind of orientation, not anyone else. She related the point that during the

> *development of the [Aboriginal education programming in the WSD#1], the kinds of things that went on like trying to decide for others who is "Native", ...I think even as Native people we have our own degrees of Nativeness and we got kind of ticked off when they [meaning non-Aboriginal educators] called us infiltrators, they [the administration] tried*

*to tell us how we should identify ourselves. Every one talked about the different degrees of being Native.*

### 7.11 Robin O t'atchanookewin

Robin like many other Aboriginal educators was involved in a committee that oversaw the development of a policy on Aboriginal education in the WSD#1. This involvement was meaningful for her and the kinds of things that occurred were still fresh in her mind as she shared her story. She told us that there was much tension in trying to convince the powers-that-be in the value of policy of Aboriginal education. The powers-that-be would bring up the fact that a policy for multicultural education had already existed so what was the point of a policy in Aboriginal education. (In an earlier section, one of the educators, Elsie, had mentioned how the existence of the multicultural policy was being used to block the idea of developing an Aboriginal education policy. Elsie had talked about the kinds of tensions that were being created between minority ethnic groups and Aboriginal peoples. Apparently the minority ethnic groups did not feel that the multicultural policy was serving their needs so why bring in a specific one for Aboriginal peoples was the question being raised. Surely, it was argued that the Aboriginal community could rely on the multicultural policy for their programming needs too?) However, as Robin continued to discuss this situation, community groups rallied to ensure that a policy on Aboriginal education was developed and after much haranguing, a policy on Aboriginal education was indeed developed.

When she spoke about this story, Robin related: *"Adopting the policy on Aboriginal education,....that process was very gruelling because it was such a resistance from the white community to recognizing the policy on Aboriginal education. The first resistance being they already had a multicultural education policy why would you want your own"*? During the process to get this policy adopted, Robin recalled that racial tensions abounded. It was finally determined by a group of individuals that the group needed to get away to a retreat and come up with a plan, Robin stated,

> *We [group of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal educators, trustees, community people etc.] went away...to come up with a mission statement and it was very hard work and there were a lot of tensions and a lot feeling and tears charges of racism. The first two years it had sat on someone's desk even though we had already gone through the process of refining it to the point where it would be acceptable to us, and our community. In the end once the administration took it over and edited it and it came back to us because we demanded to see it before it went finally to the board. But what was so disheartening was that when it did come back to us it was felt by some of the Native people who had served on that committee from the community that it was a really watered down version from what the community wanted. And there was resistance with the trustees saying that they couldn't use medicine wheel in the body of the terms .*

During this time the trustees and other officials were convinced to meet with some Elders who could talk to them about the 'Medicine Wheel' model as not being a religion but a way of life of philosophies and worldviews. This they did and after that the policy was passed. However, Robin felt that it has been several years now and the policy is not really honoured. *"It's left radically to anyone making the commitments to the educators and the administrators at school as to*

*how it gets done. So there is not any systemic way it is enforced".* Eventually Robin left the committee because she felt there was no point in staying:

> *I constantly felt the pull of the community with this framework. We were being involved to fit into the [mainstream] system as it existed and it was unwilling to change and it meant for us plug in somehow and we simply couldn't do that and hold to our own values and worldviews....In the end,...we at least made some inroads but I don't think it made the kind of impact we wanted.*

Robin spoke about other aspects of who she is as an Aboriginal woman and how it is tiring sometimes to 'be on' all the time, in other words to educate others about us, when we are in the educational settings where people are expecting something from you just because we are Aboriginal. She related the following words:

> *I've never been in a position myself to experience what it is like to be in a majority. I can only dream what that must feel like. Even just psychologically what it must feel like. It must be liberating to be in the majority and to operate the way they, the majority operate, that what they say is presumed to be important just because 'I said so' instead of always just feeling challenged [emphasis]. And you know, sometimes as an educator I feel so completely saturated! This whole need to educate is just tiring (p. 71)!*

Robin further reflected upon the ways she perceived that mainstream view Aboriginal people who are actively and openly reconnecting to their roots, she said *"The attitude of non-Aboriginal people you know, toward that reclaiming, has been to again judge that [reclaiming] as not being the original authentic you know. And it's just another way of devaluing us in our efforts, you know"*

## 7.12 Elsie O t'atchanookewin

Elsie recalled being raised in a small Native community and having to leave for residential school where she experienced much racism and oppression. She tells us that it wasn't the town's people in her opinion that were oppressive or racist but it was what when on in the residence itself. Elsie talks about the uneasy relations that occurred in her school experience, something she mentioned that she thinks about often and this is why she is so protective towards our children who she feels need a lot of support and protection. Elsie did mention this notion when she spoke about her career experiences. I share her words here in their entirety because I think that they speak volumes of the kinds of uneasy relating that went on just because she was Aboriginal 'Indian' stuck in a residential school.

> *I went through residential school too, and that when [Charlotte] was talking about the racist terms like 's----' (refers to a derogatory relating to women) and all that kind of stuff you certainly got that not so much from the town. The town was a farming community and people were basically all not very affluent, but very bright people you know, some academics have come out of that place in the non-Aboriginal community. And but they were also nice people, you, you know, church going people but not converting type of people but the residential school director was a little bit different you know, he did abuse girls and he did have a child with one of the students you know at one point. And he raised that child, you know, him and his wife they had a son of his own then they took the child. You know when we were showering and stuff he would come walk in there so you devalued yourself as a young woman. You felt that you didn't have anything that belonged to you, the privacy of your body or because he would just walk in when you were showering you know, we'd try and hide with the towel and stuff but the towels were not very big you know so it was all those kind of things, plus the oppression that happened in there does have an impact on what we think and do today!*

Further, when the discussed ensued about what happens to Aboriginal educators as they get into the system, Elsie was adamant against teaching Aboriginal Studies of any sort just because of one's race. She said that we could not assume that a person knows his/her culture and language and history just because of his/her Aboriginal background:

> *Even if Aboriginal people have their cultural ways and if they don't want to share it that is their right and this shouldn't be pushed onto them as they have been. They were usually not hired to do an Aboriginal education component in the first place if they were, then it would be different because it is known from the beginning that it is their job. And they are teachers of children not of adults so the expectation for example to teach the other teachers about Aboriginal issues and perspectives is uncalled for you know. Why are they expected to know everything?*

### 7.13 Lana O t'atchanookewin

Lana started talking about her earlier experiences too when the topics shared reflected identity issues. When she was in school in her youth, she didn't even know that she was 'Indian' until some kids in school called her a *"black Indian"*. She did not think of the difference until then, she said that she knew that she was a 'Métis-Ojibway' because they visited they're grandparents a lot and did a lot of cultural things, but *"I didn't know then that being 'Indian' was problematic and that was the way that others [mainstream] saw us. We just referred to ourselves as Métis back then. I looked at my skin one day and I thought gee, I am a different colour.* Her father's heritage is mixed Aboriginal/white while her mother's is Aboriginal Ojibway. Her mother told her that when she married her father that his family disowned him because *"he*

*married a s----"*, in reference to a derogatory term used when referring to Aboriginal women. It was interesting to hear this statement because to me it reflected the kind of lateral oppression that also went on when the issues of 'Aboriginality' according to whose definitions seemed to emerge. Lana related that she tries to get her students to look beyond the artificial differences that are imposed on us and to look at the pride of being Aboriginal whether one is Métis or First Nation. She said she tries to get students to understand the diversity of our Aboriginal peoples but at the same time to look at the common values and experiences we hold and not make the 'differences' as something to hold against each other.

### 7.14 Raquel O t'atchanookewin

Raquel talked extensively about her childhood and various experiences related to identity, family, ancestral connections and disconnection's before she came to her present situation. She also talked about learning derogatory words when she went to a city school as a child where she first learned about racism *"I learned about the term s---w"*. When she entered high school, she related that the young white boys were the ones who most directed racist remarks at her and one other Aboriginal girl who went to her high school. Even her school counsellors made stereotyped comments to Raquel when she wanted to choose certain courses for university entrance. This counsellor said she should chose something that could take her into the workforce because she will probably get

married anyhow and have kids, like most of her people do! Raquel quit school after this year, married and had children. She became a single parent after some time then, she later she entered university as a mature student through the Winnipeg Education Centre teacher education program when her children were older. She obtained a degree in education. Raquel has worked in the system for over 21 years and talked about making her way in the system. She said:

> *I used to be afraid to [speak out] but I'm not afraid to do it anymore...twenty-two years in the mainstream educational system stands for something. I've got the credibility. So, people have to listen now [laughs]. They can't ignore this Indian you know.*

Raquel shared some experiences with issues around difference. One point that she did make about her involvement in one school was:

> *I wasn't just an Indian in that school, I was just a teacher and just is not a negative statement. I was another one of the crew...there's a lot of people around that call me an Apple because I've been in the System so long and only those people who really know me know its token to feel one of the few.*

Because of her long-term involvement in the school system, she feels confidant about who she is and does not allow others to impinge upon her confidence as an Aboriginal woman who is teaching in mainstream institutions. Raquel reminded us that her teaching has been grounded in Aboriginal perspectives for a long time. She just did not think about it in that way but now with the openness and desire for Aboriginal educators to develop this orientation she can see what needs to be done and she feels that she is doing her part in developing the kinds of bridging that needs to occur around difference and uneasy relations.

### 7.15 Barbara O t'atchanookewin

Barbara responded to a point around Aboriginality and what this meant for her and how different people take it up. She thought a lot of the issues that surface around our differences is usually related to a point about who is 'Aboriginal' and who is not, about 'coming out' as an Aboriginal for some people who can pass, and about those people who try to impose constructed identities upon us, and the impacts these have on us. Barbara stated:

> *We all have our different experiences being Aboriginal. You know like someone can pass as white. And there's people like myself who have grown up in the residential school who can't pass for white, but deny and want so much to immerse themselves in mainstream society. I did this so much that you deny your children you deny you pretend to be someone something that you are not. I deliberately did that in my marriage as my children were growing up its just after the children had grown up that I realized what I had done and it was just undoing all of that it's been a horrendous experience. My own children had to go into therapy and seek therapy for it!*

Barbara talked about the waking up to 'see' how our difference was taken up with different people, with the status quo, through racist policies etc. She said,

> *It wasn't until I went to university when I first realized, that's how unaware I was I guess. I was doing a paper on Native education one time and looking at the Hawthorn report and realizing after having read that how deliberately the government set us up to assimilate us through racist policies like the 'Indian Act' and just that feeling of hatred I got when I found out! (She gave an emphatic response) I got physically ill that day just looking you know [laughs] it was such an eye opener. It was just an awful thing when I realized that generations of us were going through the system. So I think that it was then that the seed had been planted for me. It was another 15 years before I started to explore who I was as an Aboriginal person and during those years I became a teacher, I taught, and yet taught not from my own perspective but from a very Eurocentric perspective.*

It was not that Barbara did not know that she was different, she had experienced racism because of her difference, what she did not realize was the extent of the historic oppressive policies and actions against Aboriginal peoples and the extent of their impacts.

When she started to wake up to this fact, she started to question why certain things were done the way they were and she knew that they were culturally inappropriate. She felt hurt by the fact that she was asked to teach a biased curriculum. She challenged her colleagues about having to teach materials that she found racist and she was met with a lot of resistance and opposition. When she tried to change some teaching materials her colleague resisted and told her that the program she was being asked to teach was for the culturally disadvantaged, like the Native students. Barbara reacted strongly to her colleague and she shared these words,

> *I told her, 'what the hell do you mean by disadvantaged culturally? I said I'm an Indian' back then it was the term Indian was in vogue. And I said and I'm teaching Indian kids why can't I teach the way that I want to teach them? And ah she says, but you have to teach this program. And I said and I feel, I speak my own language and I don't feel that I am disadvantaged and I said how dare you say that! And so she left in a huff...".*

Barbara then took this issue up with the principal and the Chief and Council of the school where she was teaching. According to Barbara, she convinced the chief and principal that the program was culturally inappropriate and had it discontinued. This said it was these kinds of experiences that kept opening her

mind and eyes to the level of oppression that our students were up against, simply because they were Aboriginal.

She related more stories about her experiences in working with Native students coming from northern communities for entrance into high school. The curriculum was so culturally inappropriate that the grade-nine year was always a lost year. *"It was just a year of adjustment, and many of the students faced many incidents of racism and many of them left the system for the year".*

Barbara further talked about her experiences in teaching at First Nation's schools where local control was supposed to be the working norm but

> *all we were doing was delivering policies that were still mandated by Eurocentric policies. Yeah, we know it's a big hassle, let's just work at it. It's almost if you are stuck there you have to keep working. You know that there are going to be obstacles, the stereotyping, the racism everything is there but don't let those things stop you from doing that work.*

Barbara says that she has to tell herself this many times just to keep on working in spite of the odds. Barbara worked in a variety of education settings and when she worked in inner city education she was pleased to be able to work with diverse Aboriginal students in helping them connect to their heritage through her teaching and administrating. She stated:

> *They came from different backgrounds they came from the true hard core inner city and we had kids that were third generation urban Aboriginal and they had no connection with their rural roots or with their cultural heritage. So it was a real it became a struggle for those students you know they, some of them were involved in gangs especially the younger ones, once they reached senior three or four that they are already established. But the senior ones, senior twos, god it was tough! And its still like that you know. And we struggled with those kids. But the one thing that I can say even though we had those true inner city kids that*

*they had they have a culture of their own, they do its street culture. And they have this sense of loyalty like you wouldn't believe if they don't want to say anything about anybody else they will not! They will rat on their peers, never, they will never ever do that! If you establish that rapport with them, that relationship they'll trust you and that's so very important that they've got to trust you and then they will let you in. But to get to that is tough. And they give you the respect you know they might be the toughest kid off of the street but once they come into that school and that respect is there.*

Barbara was able has worked tirelessly to advocate for Aboriginal children in the system. She has raised awareness at many levels across the province with workshops, conference presentations and inservice teacher education all in the name of asserting Aboriginal perspectives that can counter the negative stereotypes and racism that still exists.

### 7.16 Ellen O t'atchanookewin

Ellen is a confident woman who has always felt comfortable with her identity as a First Nation Ojibway. She wasn't always aware that racism and stereotypes abounded until she encountered some racist incidents. As a child she grew up in her home community and she was the majority there. She never thought of herself as 'different' until in her grade five year at an inner city school (her parents had moved into the city then), she was confronted with an outrageous act. Ellen said:

*...In grade five, I was out by my locker and this one little boy came up to me and he started doing a "war dance", hopping around in a circle and chanting oooh, oooh, oooh, waa! I didn't understand what the heck he was doing and I didn't understand why he was doing it in front of me. I guess that I had seen Disney and other motion pictures as well too, the*

*stereotypical thing you know the cowboy and Indian. So I thought, why is he doing that to me?*

Ellen was not sure what she should do at that time but this incident stuck out for her. She didn't realize then that the boy saw her as this 'stereotypically constructed Indian'. She just knew that what he was doing was wrong. She said she felt the hurt and in her adult years she has seen this man around. She often wonders if she should go and talk to him and ask him if he remembered doing that and ask him why. She recalled this incident because she said she has heard of similar things still happening in today's schools. She is adamant that our students should not have to put up with that kind of stereotyping. She recalled another incident that occurred years later in her high school where she was a part of a Native Cultural Club. She knew that some of the mainstream students did not really think they should have a club and one day, Ellen said:

*Someone had hung a dead bird on the door knob because they knew what days we met because it was always on the intercom that it was announced "Native club is meeting today at lunch, everyone is welcome" and we were like, you know what it was funny because we didn't react to it sometimes you say like this is something that is serious but do we want to challenge every little incident you know? And so for us I thought we'll just take this well, we felt really bad about the bird having to lose its life, well maybe they found it I don't know, we didn't know any circumstances about the bird there but you know we thought you know all you have to do is just say whoever did this is sick and we just had to laugh! That was our response we laughed at it.*

In bringing her experiences to the present time, Ellen talked about how we must guard against both racism and tokenism in our work. She stated:

*And, even with tokenism? Well, so we have one Aboriginal person, so it's okay you know they're "doing" something, or so it looks, those kinds of*

*things. So in that sense for me the experience affects me now in my workplace. Because for me I work in a predominantly white workplace. Like as Aboriginal people we kind of have to stick together that's why we have regular staff meetings because you can get those racist subtleties that can get to you. And they can get to you if you don't have a strong sense of who you are? We need to have a strong positive self-image and for me that's part of what I feel I am strong in my identity.*

That sense of strong self-identity, self-esteem is what Ellen feels needs to get passed on to our students so that they can stand up and challenge the stereotyping assaults that we experience. Ellen also talked about what can happen if to colleagues who are the only Aboriginal person on staff, certain things happen where others make assumptions about what we must know or understand without ever asking our thoughts or opinions first. She said:

*...If you are the only Aboriginal person on staff, you 'become' the expert and you provide us with the Aboriginal perspective. I remember one incident where an Aboriginal parent came in one of the schools that I worked in and she was fluent in her language and she couldn't speak English very well? So they called me down making the assumption that, did they know that I even understood or did I even speak an Aboriginal language? There are assumptions made that we have the language or we have the culture. So to me in that instance it just happened that she spoke Ojibway, seaulteaux and so I was able to understand what she was saying. And I was able to speak back to her but very mamashis (haphazard) and we actually ended up having a good laugh because she wasn't laughing at me, but with me, me trying to communicate with her? But I think in other school there is often that assumption made that we must speak our language and we must know all about the culture. And you know, it might an educator who is Aboriginal and who could or might be a Christian [who might not support Aboriginal worldviews]!*

## *CHAPTER 8*
## Atchanookewina *(Stories)*

# AWAKENING TO CULTURAL/LANGUAGE DISRUPTIONS: RECLAIMING AND DEVELOPING ABORIGINAL IDENTITIES, PERSPECTIVES AND PHILOSOPHIES

*To be an Aboriginal person, to identify with an Indigenous heritage in these late colonial times, requires a life of reflection, critique, persistence and struggle. (McMaster, G., & Martin L, P.11)*

*Here, in their words, are Aboriginal voices that speak clearly and persuasively about the need for and the right to culture and language programs based on Aboriginal perspectives (The Common Framework, P.10)*

## *8.1 Ellen O t'atchanookewin*

Ellen, a First Nation Ojibway woman who was raised in her community, moved to the city, with her family, when she was a young girl. Like many Aboriginal peoples who migrate to urban settings, her family kept connected through family visits to their community. Also, her mother became involved in Aboriginal community sites in the city of Winnipeg as a way to staying in touch with her heritage. Ellen said, *"my parents instilled in me that whole connection of family; that is important. The connection to family and back to the land. And.... Looking at basic needs the basic needs of survival that's how I grew up.... My mom used to go the friendship centre (Indian and Metis) all the time and she was part of the sewing circle and stuff like that".* This connection to the

friendship centre was an extension of a way of life from their home community of relating to their relatives and friends. The friendship centre offered the opportunity to Ellen and her family to be amongst their own people. This was their identity: a cultural and linguistic connection. It is important to note that Friendship centres across major Canadian sites have been places where Aboriginal people moving into urban centres could stay connected to our communities. Likewise they have been a place of safety for Aboriginal people who migrated to the city looking for economic opportunities. Many Aboriginal people in Manitoba hear about friendship centres through the 'moccasin telegraph', an Aboriginal communication networking system that I wrote about in chapter one. So particularly in the 50' to 80's friendship centres were a haven for many Aboriginal people moving into cities. As Ellen related to us, her mother frequented the centre along with her children.

Ellen was always aware that she was Ojibway and that her parents were Ojibway and Ojibway speakers but the terms of what that identity meant as "Indians" or "Native people" or "Aboriginal people" become a process of awareness building for her. She became more aware of who she was, distinct, as an Aboriginal person through her schooling experiences with racism and exclusion in her elementary and high school years. She was adamant that others needed to know too, both about the issues and our contributions. She tells us that:

> *In my next few years...I thought you know it's time that people become aware of who Aboriginal people are...so in high school, actually it started*

*in junior high school...I began to get involved with Native Studies clubs and you know those kind of things...at [my high school] we actually had a Native student club...we used to...bring films in, films strips and bring in speakers to come and talk with students [and teachers who were interested].*

According to Ellen, these clubs were places where Aboriginal students could develop a sense of positive identity and a place where they could meet in safety to discuss issues that affected them as students. Ellen was developing her own in a more positive atmosphere than the times and places when she was confronted with acts of racism in the classrooms and hallways, at the same time she felt that she could was fine being. In her attempts to deal with these, she says that she just did her own thing and minded her own business. She felt a sense of independence because she felt comfortable with herself. She said:

*It's not that I'm not cognizant about what happens around me... it's just I'm just secure with who I am and you know I know who I am and what I am? And I don't try to fit in someone else's values because I have my own values? And so for me I would just go along and you know I would hang about by myself but I would also hang out with the crowd too. I guess people who were mature and could just accept people [Aboriginal people] for who they were? Like they didn't make a big point about my difference?*

When Ellen completed her degree in education, she was aware of her identity as an Aboriginal woman and she was aware of the potential for racism. Remindful of her earlier schooling experiences with racism, she wanted to develop effective ways to deal with these issues in her role of an educator. She shared her reflections about beginning to think about her experiences and her understanding of them when she worked in inner city schools. She said, *"I've always stayed in inner city when I was teaching. I guess that was where I really*

*began to question and began to understand peoples: the subtleties, the mannerisms, I and began to see things from a totally different perspective you know in how we become conscious?"* For Ellen, going beyond simply understanding her world as an Ojibway woman was the awakening and coming into understanding and developing Aboriginal identities, issues and perspectives, and philosophies as an ongoing process of learning. Furthermore, it was an ongoing process of coming into ways to challenge the inequities and racism that existed and to integrate Aboriginal perspectives into curriculum.

### *8.2 Bert O t'atchanookewin*

Bert, a Métis man, has worked in Aboriginal communities since he became a teacher in the 70's. He has always supported Aboriginal identity development and Aboriginal perspectives though the understanding of what these were changed over his tenure as an educator. Bert reflected upon what these meant for him he said, *"When I was growing up, I don't recall any overt symbols of being Aboriginal that we see today. For example, the sacred use of sweetgrass and ceremonies.... This came later in my life as a[n educator]".* He recalled the different ways he tried to immerse himself into understanding education from an Aboriginal perspective. It is important to note that the proliferation of Aboriginal symbols in mainstream education is a contemporary phenomena. The Indian Act of Canada outlawed ceremonies in some areas where symbols were a primary source of learning, the act also limited contacts amongst Aboriginal peoples

through oppressive policies. It is only in the last 30 years that the symbols emerged as a driving force in Aboriginal education.

It was when Bert taught in northern communities where the majority of the speakers where Ojibway that he started to reflect upon what this meant for him as an Ojibway person who did not speak the language. He could see that there was cultural differences from that of the dominant society, he stated, *"I began to get in touch with Northern Ojibway. I began to understand cultural nuances. I began to understand the traditional in living memory"*. It was then that he started to find ways to develop his own teaching style to integrate Aboriginal perspectives by listening, reading, and/or conferencing all with Aboriginal colleagues and knowings and processes in mind. In developing this position of teaching from an Aboriginal perspective he stated, *"In 89, I used sharing circles in formal school systems to develop programs that were Aboriginal in focus. I did this once I learned how we could incorporate this into teaching".* He did this because he wanted to revitalize, rekindle and draw from the knowledge of Aboriginal knowings and processes. He acknowledged how his relatives were disconnected from their cultural ways and symbols because of Christian influences in his community. Even though he did not <u>see</u> (emphasis mine, teachings could have been done in secret) evidence of 'ceremonial traditions' in his community, he still recalled there were various teachings (philosophies) that seemed prevalent, *"as a child, Aboriginal traditional*

*ceremonies were non-existent, however the teachings of respect, kindness & honesty were practised".*

Bert continued to talk about what being Métis has meant and done for him. He stated:

> *The Métis cultural element of adaptation to changes has helped me live in the modern world and embrace traditional cultural practises. At Frontier Collegiate* (this is a residential high school for students who did not have any high school in their home community inclusive of white rural children, Metis and Indian children), *I was taught discipline through a variety of mundane chores - waxing floors, cleaning toilets...at Frontier my experience provided much more than academics. It provided a 'safe launch' into the 'real world' because just being part of the experience said; "It's ok to be an Indian or Metis or whatever?".*

Bert further spoke about his earlier experiences as he reflected upon when he thought about the issues of reconnecting to Aboriginal identities and striving for culturally relevant curriculum in education. He referred to his family and his colleagues who 'left' their culture behind to join in the dominant society to try to make a living for themselves. Many of his own siblings have college and university diplomas and degrees and he shared his concern about forsaking who we are for the sake of education that is usually so mainstream. His lamentation of what can happen to us when we pursue education and training is evident in this statement:

> *...The quick flight into middle class values leaves [Aboriginal] families wondering what is meaningful in our Aboriginal heritage.... My alienation from my culture was the result of the increased educational opportunities. Going to "boarding school" in Cranberry was expected and encouraged. My early role models included my brothers and others such as those who went into politics and education.*

Bert "dropped out" of university for a time and spent time with his grandfather who was a trapper. My guess is that he left university due to its cultural irrelevance and his own feelings of alienation, he would have been one of the handfuls of Aboriginal students in university in the 70's. Like many of his cohorts who attended university and left before degree completion, he likely did not realize the impact of culturally irrelevant curriculum. He said:

> *I dropped out of university in 75 to join my fraternal grandfather on the trapline. Childhood bonds were rekindled and I sat for hours listening to...stories, camping, berry picking ...learning to live off the land fit perfectly with my own sense of freedom, another Metis Cultural element. From my Grandparents I learned about 'Mother Earth' without the ceremonies. I recall several offerings of tobacco when picking berries, and medicine. Yet, we were encouraged to be educated and to enjoy the 'trappings' of the modern world."*

Bert continued to talk about trapping with his grandfather then he infused a bit of humour about 'trapping' in the traditional hunting sense and getting trapped in mainstream values, he chuckled, " *I have not been 'trapped' yet and I enjoy creative comforts and the opportunity to live out the responsibilities of the Sturgeon Clan".* When Bert was learning about the Clan System of his area though his cultural and spiritual reconnection process, he learned that he belonged to the Sturgeon Clan. These were knowings that became more pronounced in his own development as a teacher that believes that we must reconnect and integrate Aboriginal perspectives into our work.

### 8.3 Sandra O t'atchanookewin

When Sandra, a Métis-Ojibway woman was talking about her identity she stated:

> *I don't know too much about cultural stuff all I remember is what my grandfather said, "you are Métis", so that is what I say, "I am Métis" and it's all very interesting. I'm trying to find out what my background is from my grandfather's side we have done a family tree ...and so I feel like a child sometimes...I have to listen and learn because there is so much out there...I find it so fascinating.*

I found it interesting that Sandra would refer to herself as a child who is just now learning some new knowledge, which she was in fact doing. She felt like a child when she was searching her roots because there was so much information she did not have and she was learning as she was seeking her background. Sandra also recalled instances when she realized that her identity was an "Indian", that is, her Aboriginal identity was called in question in a negative way. She said:

> *One time we [Aboriginal students going to a residential school] were travelling.... We stopped off at this one place...run by these white people and when we got off the bus...[to] go buy...[a] drink, you know when you get off for a while? So we got off and then I noticed that these people were following us around going in between the aisles and following us around then I said to my friend 'why are they doing that'? And then it finally hit me when my friend said, 'they think we're going to steal'. 'Why would they think I'm going to steal?', I said. Then my friend said, 'They might be watch because you are an Indian', I said 'what?'.*

According to Sandra, this was the first time she came across negative incidents that had to do with her racial heritage. She related that she felt fortunate that she was protected from this kind of behaviour as a young child. She started to question that 'these people' were that behaved so unkindly.

When Sandra came across other experiences that related to her being Aboriginal, she began to ask her grandparents about traditional practices such as names and names of people she knew who had Ojibway names:

> *I asked my grandparents, did they know names [and their translations] and the thing with them is that they know these names but it's in our Native language. These names, it's not an English name? So it makes it hard to trace but I got some people working on this. They say well, I don't know how to say this in English. You see my grandmother speaks seaulteau (Ojibway) so she would tell me in that language and I got to try and figure out the English equivalent and what it would be called now sort of thing (laughs).*

In her role as an educator, Sandra now understands the importance for teachers both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal to understand Aboriginal perspectives and find ways to integrate them into the curriculum and into their professional practice. To support this idea, she ensured that teachers were able to find the resources they needed: *"I told them that any time that I look for resources I've looked to our...library first and then the department of [education] and the other one would be the Manitoba Cultural Indian Education Centre".* It seemed that once Sandra became aware of how important it was to connect to Aboriginal resources and develop a stronger Aboriginal focus in her work, she also helped other educators work toward this same goal.

### *8.4 Casey O t'atchanookewin*

> *I don't know which clan I'm from...I don't have a spiritual name. I guess I'm considered a lost spirit that's what it seems like, but a spirit that is deeply actively involved in a search, a quest to find out about what I'm about, who I am as a person and where my roots are.*

Casey was passionate about his quest for understanding his own disconnection and desire for reconnection to his Aboriginal roots. He demonstrated his desire to reconnect to his roots by taking an active interest and involvement in different activities in the Aboriginal community. For example, he has audited a course in Aboriginal studies, attended various traditional ceremonies, participated in educational Aboriginal community events, deliberated with various educators on topics related to Aboriginal education all in the quest for rekindling, reconnecting, and understanding his identity and that of his Aboriginal heritage. He spoke about his grandparents and of his own disconnection to Aboriginal culture:

> *I have known my great grandfather's name and my great grandmother's name so.... I found out that my family comes from the [First Nation community]...and they were hard working people...and ah I guess this generation, my generation, is the generation that is really gone brutalized in the western education system taken to the next level and the next level until there are a lot of levels [immersed] in the western system. So, ah it's interesting to be sitting here with such diverse people with such diverse...backgrounds and understandings of each other. And that it's such a learning experience for myself as well, and ah I think that's the one thing we have to continue to do is to keep learning and evolving as [Aboriginal] people because as I have learned in [a] course that culture is not static. Cultures are constantly evolving as people are constantly evolving and that...Battiste (refers to an Aboriginal scholar whose works he read, see Battiste, 1998) has said about cultures: that it's not us that keep the culture going, its the culture that keeps us going that's what she said.*

Casey thinks about his own location in this passage and realized that his identity is one that is constantly changing from understanding what has happened to his family and his roots. His own reclaiming process has taken a lot of turns. He talked about the different conversations he had with Aboriginal educators about

what happened to Aboriginal people historically and what needs to happen. He refers to one conversation he had with one of his colleague he claims taught him a great deal about the history of Aboriginal colonization, particularly through schooling:

> *We would have long conversations about that and because I was so completely ignorant, completely brainwashed, completely duped by the Eurocentric education system that I received. [Barbara] explained something to me one time, but at the same time I was so hard headed about that that I just did not accept that. Until I decided to go and pursue my education that I realized the truth, and by reaiizing that truth and understanding that truth it was my mission to take that truth and understanding [Aboriginal students at the high school], and that's what I have been doing for the past little while.*

He realized that his grandmother had been to an "Indian residential school" and this experience left an impact on her and her family including him. Perhaps this is a case of multigenerational impacts?

> *My grandmother was a product of the residential school experience and as a result much of what she taught us (myself and brothers) was not from an Aboriginal perspective...As a young person growing up in a Euro-Canadian system, I was completely ashamed of my cultural background. If the question of cultural background came up my response was always "I'm Ukrainian" or "I'm Italian". Much of the brainwashing took place at school simply because my responses were survival mechanisms. Even though I grew up in the inner city and was surrounded by other Native Children my responses still saved me from public ridicule. I maintained [that] state of mind for many years until I was exposed to the truth about my people and culture. Now I feel it is my responsibility to share our perspectives to young Native People.*

Now for Casey, his vision is to continue to make his connections stronger through his

immersion into Aboriginal perspectives and in this way to contribute to the Aboriginal knowings and processes that is gaining credibility in society today.

### *8.5 Sammy O t'atchanookewin*

Sammy is a Métis woman who speaks her Mother language and who has been immersed in Aboriginal education for quite some time. Although she was connected to her heritage as a Métis woman and as an Ojibway speaker, she did not always feel comfortable with the label "Indian" signified with its negative stereotypes, taken up later in this section. Young, 1997 in her unpublished thesis titled "Anishinabe Voice: The Cost of Education in a Non-Aboriginal World" discussed this same concern with the term "Indian" although she was comfortable with her identity as an Anishinabe woman. Young felt compelled to live with the term "Indian" because that was the way the educational authorities saw her and this was the way she was categorized through the Indian Act. Sammy, on the other hand is not "Indian" under the Indian Act but categorized as Métis. However, the term "Indian" is still used by various Aboriginal people as a common term, the legal/political distinctions become blurred or are non-existent in the minds of the user. What is important is that the person is considered Cree, Ojibway, Dene or First Peoples of Canada. Out of habitual common usage, Sammy uses the term "Indian" to talk about a naming ceremony she attended. She felt that time was right for her to get an "Indian name". She realized that she did not mind the reference to the term "Indian name" and she said she realized how much she has grown:

> *One day when I was ready I decided that it was time that I got an Indian name and I so I offered tobacco one Saturday, then I told my kids about*

*this and I asked them if they wanted to come with me. I told them that it was up to them...I offered tobacco and the three of us went so I got my Indian name...I guess the more and more I learn about my culture the more that I don't stay on the personal and it makes me stronger (p. 14).*

Sammy continued to talk about different critical incidents in her teaching practice that caused her to ponder about and act upon Aboriginal issues. She related a story where one time she was confronted with the decision about what she should do when she was asked by her administrators if she could co-ordinate a Pow Wow (Aboriginal traditional dances) for an upcoming multicultural day. It is important to note that Sammy had not co-ordinated any such events prior to being asked. Sammy believes that she was asked because she was the only Aboriginal teacher at the school. At that time Sammy did not know what to do because she had not yet learned about the cultural and spiritual significance of Pow Wow gatherings:

*And of course, because I was the only Aboriginal teacher they asked me if I would teach my students how to dance the Pow Wow and have them perform at this multicultural day. I didn't know what a Pow Wow was, I'm mean I'd seen it. But I didn't know how to teach it... I mean where we grew up, I grew up in a Metis community what we learned in terms of dances were Red River jig, squares dances that's what we learned. So I said to myself, I can't say that I don't know how to teach about the Pow Wow. So what I did was...'okay I'll do it'. (She laughs and this is met with a response of laughter from the circle members, as a way of understanding what she experienced) So, I called up my sister who's been more involved in learning how to live the traditional way and I said 'you know what I got this thing and I don't know what to do' and she said 'Well, I know a person that could come to your class and she'll come and teach the children how to do the Pow Wow, I know another person that could come and sing and drum on that day', so she came to teach...Anyway she came and she taught them and the day came and they danced. It was very nice, actually.*

In spite of not knowing some of the traditional and cultural ceremonial, symbolic expressions of being Cree or Ojibway, Sammy talked about the fact that Aboriginal ways were a strong part of her upbringing. It is just that she did not have the opportunity to integrate this knowledge into her life as she lived in Winnipeg where she had encountered racism and a dominant mainstream life. She shares her views on her thoughts about Aboriginal identity:

> *Aboriginal traditions were a strong part of my upbringing. I grew up in a Metis community where we lived a lifestyle. I spoke Ojibway, listened to stories told by my grandma which taught me morals and values...practised jigging and square dancing, learned about traditional health practices and medicines...I learned to respect Elders.... And learned the value of reciprocity (sharing and giving to others).... To value others (showed this through our hospitality toward others). I learned to work with and help others, and I learned about Louis Riel from my grandma. Although Aboriginal traditions were a part of my upbringing, I have not always been proud of my Aboriginal heritage. As I reflect I remember some Metis people in our community were racist toward the First Nations people who lived in a neighbouring community. I did not learn to be ashamed of my Aboriginal heritage until I moved to Winnipeg in 1966. It was at that time I began to experience racism. At school I was called an "f------ Indian". At home, we had to hide the bannock (our Native bread) when non-Aboriginal people visited our home. As an Adult I have experienced racism in the city...I was ashamed of my Aboriginal heritage for a very long time. It was very hard to live a life where I did not feel good about who I was. Fortunately, though I reversed this shame and am now proud of my Aboriginal heritage. This process has taken several years of learning about the forces that shaped me, the history of my people, our values and customs. This has made me a stronger person and I know now what racism is and that it is wrong. I also understand that we are an oppressed people and work to improve our situation. It feels good to be proud of who I am, it is not as easy to knock me down.*

I suggest that these words just read speak volumes of Sammy's reflections about developing confidence in her heritage.

### *8.6 Barry O t'atchanookewin*

Barry, a First Nation Cree man, left his home community when he was 13 years old. There was no high school in his community so he had to leave if he wanted to continue his education. He talked about the very Christian oriented education he had before he left his community. *"I was 13 years old when I left [my home] and I had a strong Christian training background, I was in Mennonite training, in Catholic training, and the other one was United church training, and Christian Reform training I'm all trained out!" (He laughed when he talked about his religious experiences and the other circle participants joined in the laughter)* Barry continued:

> *It's been two years now that I said I am going back to my roots (he laughs) to learn about my [Aboriginal] way of worship...I have been raised as a catholic, I like to be a servant. Part of my life that I always share. But, it's kind of beginning to haunt me now that changes the concept of how I should worship, talk to the creator, and understand my traditions? That is coming to haunt me now because I am an Aboriginal person who is a speaker of the language they (he refers to colleagues and community, both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal) come to me and say things and ask me questions about Aboriginal things and Aboriginal stuff. They ask me about Aboriginal cultural things that I don't really know how to answer. I just started to walk, three years now, this path. I prayed first that there has to be a reason for me, especially for so many years of my life I considered myself a Christian that's the thing I learned to pray every morning. Every morning I humble myself that whatever comes please take care of me, oh Jesus, please Jesus you know this past two years I have I have tried to walk in more spiritual ways. There's work there...I've tried to learn more about Indian spirituality...Sometimes people approach me as an Elder, I guess in some situations I am. I am aware of some of the ceremonies they are very ancient. I am just learning how to work with them.*

I found Barry's candour about his Christian connections so refreshing. It reminded me how much our communities are still entrenched with Christian churches that have a hold on many of our peoples (Fitznor, 1998) so that when our people turn to Aboriginal traditional ceremonies they are looked upon with much suspicion. It was clear to see that Barry was experiencing some anxiety about how far to explore and reclaim his traditional roots, he is a strong speaker of his language and often people put him in a position where they assume he also knows much about the ceremonies. Finally, he spoke about his parents and their connection to evangelism and his shared his fears about that because he felt that evangelizing goes against the grain of the reclaiming process. He talked about how Indian spirituality is looked down upon by the Evangelists in his community and talked about how this is a problem in most First Nations communities. This is a struggle that is highlighted many times over in the process of decolonizing our communities.

### 8.7 Sara O t'atchanookewin

Sara, a Metis woman who has experienced much reconnecting to Aboriginal understanding and knowings in the past few years talked about her experiences with this process. She still questions her own identity from time to time:

> *I think that we don't give the kind of attention to some of the experiences our people had that it deserves (referring to the residential schools experiences)...and I was thinking that it wasn't until I went to the Aboriginal Achievement Awards banquet and I walked into that room and*

*there was a sea of Aboriginal faces. It was just marvellous! It just lit up my face, it lit up my body and it lit up my soul! And I remember that feeling. After, probably around two years ago after when I was teaching Native studies courses.... It felt so good so right. I was questioning whether or not I belonged to that room with the students...how could I teach the course and help people when I was still questioning my own identity. I went to my father after the awards, and it told me how strongly that assimilation had happened to us and to some students. I had that nagging voice. Do I belong to Aboriginal community? Now, I don't have that voice it's finally gone.... I think it, I feel strong and healthy now because I had so much trouble realizing how much I had been assimilated and how far down the path I had gone and when I reached that realization, I understood I think that's when I started being sure about who I was?*

Sara talked about related experiences then she went on to talk about her ongoing commitment to expand her knowledge now that she is more immersed in exploring her ancestral identity. It has been a difficult path for her since people do not 'see' her as an 'Aboriginal' person at first, she is taken to be 'French' when people are curious about her identity. She finds that when she is overt about her identity then that's when the questioning happens, mostly from colleagues. She is clear that our students need the kind of advocacy and support she feels that she can provide. *"As a teacher, you know I am starting to find my voice and I am starting to question and I am starting to challenge and I am starting to say that this is not right".*

### *8.8 Rachel O t'atchanookewin*

When Rachel talked about the process of becoming aware of what it meant to be Aboriginal and an educator she thought about the kind of teaching she did when she got into one particular school. She was assigned to teach

maths and Native Studies. Her training background was in maths education, not Native Studies. Her administrator assumed that she could teach Native Studies because she was Aboriginal so he assigned her this task. Rachel felt obligated to take on this task although she was hesitant about teaching Native studies:

> *So I was kind of, I don't know if I was frightened or insecure maybe about teaching Native Studies, because I never considered myself an expert and a lot of what I was dealing with back then when I think about it was the image that I had about myself, my self-esteem and so on. So that wasn't really that positive.... I never took a Native Studies course and there was one other Aboriginal teacher in the school but he was in the Alternative program, so they didn't really expect him to come out of that program to teach the native studies in the regular.*

Rachel grew up in a Metis community where she was exposed of many aspects of her heritage with regards to values, language, foods, hunting, fishing, trapping, and social gatherings that included Metis jigging and fiddling. When she was talking about reconnecting to more traditional activities Rachel said, *"We lived in poverty and my grandparents were staunch Roman Catholics. Pow Wows and sweats were already lost. I was re-introduced to (traditional) teachings at a youth/elder conference in the early 70's in Brandon, Manitoba".* The 70's were a time when there was a reopening of the ceremonies that once were practised in secrecy for fear of reprisals from state officials (Youngblood, 1995). Rachel talked about how glad she was to be able to take part in these activities. She is still connected to her Metis heritage and expressions of food, dance and music and she finds ways to integrate them into her life when she can.

Rachel talked about how her upbringing impacted on how she does things today. She remembered stories about her grandparents and community attitudes

and how racist notions of superiority played into the lives of Metis and 'Indian' people. These notions then affected how she perceived her identity. She shared this with us:

> *My status Indian grandmother was from [First Nation community]. She met my grandfather in [a Metis community] and married him when she was 17 years old. She lost her (Indian) status then and adopted the ways of the [Metis community]. If you know anything about [this community] people deny their Aboriginal roots. In fact, they are ashamed to associate themselves with "Indians". When I was growing up in [my community]. The Metis people in the community always put themselves above the "Indians" from the reserve. The interesting thing though is if you looked at how the Indians and Metis lived [they were] identical! The language, mannerisms, food were all the same. We were all embarrassed to be Aboriginal. We were all brainwashed to believe white people were better than we were!*

Rachel now participates in all aspects of Aboriginal life, including Metis culture and more traditional expressions and she sought ways of integrating Aboriginal values into her work.

### *8.9 Anna O t'atchanookewin*

Anna, an Ojibway woman, speaks her language and she was clear about her interest in working with Aboriginal students in inner city schools. It seemed to her that it was not so much having to develop and understand an Aboriginal perspective she was immersed in her language and cultural ways. What was new to her was the Aboriginal spirituality that she later included into her life and teaching. She talked about her identity and what she knew about her community connections. Because Christianity was dominant in the life of Anna and her

family to the point that they did not participate in Aboriginal traditional ceremonies although she felt that it was always there:

> *Our way or life or culture was taught daily by my parents, grandparents and other extended family members. The Ojibwe/Saulteaux language was the vehicle of how we learnt about our way of life. [However], spirituality and/or traditional beliefs were not overly emphasised; although elements of spirituality were evident within my family. My parents and grandparents did not practice spirituality as in ceremonies or sweats. However, they had great respect for this way of life. Christianity changed their beliefs about Aboriginal spirituality within time, both my maternal and paternal grandparents became [church] ministers.*

Anna perceives herself as someone who has grown up in two worlds. When she moved away from her community she realized the importance of her own culture. *"Having grown up in both worlds I respect and admire my Aboriginal roots, for example my language and culture. Only when I moved away from my family and community did I realise the importance of my cultural identity".* She wanted to make clear that the reclaiming process of what being Aboriginal is about for many of our people is not limited to ceremonies and sweats. It is more than that, *"I know this isn't all there is to culture".* Anna cautioned us about how we might consider taking up cultural activities that include spirituality because many of the Aboriginal parents do not necessarily understand this way and they would not immediately embrace these activities just because they are Aboriginal oriented.

> *The Aboriginal parents that I saw...were kind of distant I felt, you know, they didn't know who I was. I guess they weren't used to seeing an Aboriginal teacher maybe within the school who was involved in Aboriginal activities. The other Aboriginal teacher made it known to the other parents that she wouldn't be involved in cultural activities.*

This is a caution that other educators also discussed at one time or another: We cannot assume that because we as Aboriginal educators act on our own understandings about Aboriginal expressions or those of the administrators (as experienced by some participants) that the Aboriginal parents and/or students will also embrace these with the same level of understanding and enthusiasm. It requires a process of what Battiste, 1998 has talked about: a deliberate decolonizing thinking about learning activities that help us think through what has happened and what knowings and processes we might wish to promote, reclaim, reconnect and rekindle.

### 8.10 Robin O t'atchanookewin

> *It was through education that we lost much of ourselves as Aboriginal peoples, and it is through education that we will recover that which we lost.*

Robin is an educator who was involved more in the political lobbying part of the circle of Aboriginal education. She was one of the few Aboriginal educators who participated in various committees, councils and lobby groups to get the division to include Aboriginal education as an important aspect of the division policies and practices. She indicated that there were many times that individuals within the WSD#1 had to be convinced, persuaded and educated about Aboriginal perspectives and its distinction from Multicultural education. Aboriginal education, she posited, is a field of its own therefore developing Aboriginal curriculum, programs and training was necessary for the success of our children.

This idea is discussed by Hampton, (1993, p.10) as 'thing of its own kind'. Robin commented about how much the mainstream community resisted a policy on Aboriginal education just because they already had a policy on multicultural education. Why would they want another policy? *"We made the distinction that we are First Nations members on Turtle Island and as such we want our children and others to know about the contributions our people had in making this country".*

In recalling her own development of integrating Aboriginal knowings and processes into her life, Robin felt that with a university degree she did not even have Aboriginal content and knowledge to do with culture and spirituality. This is something she has developed and integrated into her work over the years of her involvement in educational issues. Like many of her colleagues in the Aboriginal Teachers' Circle, she has always been involved in political and activism work to advance Aboriginal education so integrating the spirituality and culture was a welcome change for her. When she was talking about what Aboriginal identity meant to her Robin stated:

> *My assessment of Aboriginal perspectives in based on the various regions, Nations and languages we each originated from, so I would use the plural. There are many ways of being an Aboriginal person, and while the "orthodox" traditional ways were not directly taught to me by my family of origin, I believe the values and traditions were translated to me by example. Indirectly, I was brought up on all of the traditional values, just not in verbal instruction. Residential schools did not completely destroy that - but it certainly distorted much of what I began with -as a cultural, language, spiritual base. My authenticity was compromised. And so in my healing journey now I find I must reclaim my authentic beginnings and grow from that. I have distinct memory of Elders in my original community with their medicine bundles, and the legends and teachings. I was 5 years*

*old when I left my home. My father was English but had a great respect for the Aboriginal People and lived as one of the community with values congruent with the community's. My experiences in childhood prior to being taken away to residential school are a strong statement about the importance of early childhood education and the lasting effects of early teachings.*

Robin continued to share her perspective on what needs to happen for Aboriginal people to reclaim and regain what was almost lost. She gives us a lot of hope for the future through her words:

*I believe it is entirely possible to heal from the atrocities committed in not only residential schools, but through the process of colonisation. The struggle toward wholeness and healing is difficult and is a long journey for most. We need trained professionals, the help of Elders, the help of sharing circles, ceremonies, and songs. We need to gather together in healthy ways. We need to share our grief and triumphs. I have found it most helpful to be part of Aboriginal women's circle and to go through healing sessions with other women who experienced residential schools. And then to move on to start making contributions in our community and workplaces that promote healing, raise issues etc.*

I offer the following quote again, as it is a powerful statement in favour of Culturally Relevant education. "*It was through education that we lost much of ourselves as Aboriginal peoples, and it is through education we will recover that which we lost (albeit temporarily). Therefore, healing will be brought about when appropriate changes are made in education".*

### *8.11 Charlotte O t'atchanookewin*

Charlotte reflected upon her identity and ways of developing Aboriginal perspectives by recalling instances in her childhood where she felt that in her community the idea was there to excel whether you wanted to be a trapper or go

into drama. She remarked on how her community had to fight for relevant education for the Metis children who went to school there. They fought for control over their own decision making of relevant curriculum. So for her she said, *"those thoughts were there early in on in my life".* Charlotte thanks her family for keeping connected:

> *Thanks to my mother and her family especially my grandpa who always reminded us of who we really are. The values of sharing honesty and modest balance taught in the context of family and communities. In my community, the people tend to be very politically vocal. A locally Metis controlled school was established in my home community in 1972. They have fought long and hard for hunting, fishing and trapping rights. Our community gatherings related to church functions, berry picking, and fishing.*

Although Charlotte talks about church functions as part of her community upbringing she did not analyse how this might or might not fit with Aboriginal ways nor examine the disruptions that churches caused. For her, this was a form of community gathering of her people.

Charlotte went on to discuss the value of understanding one's worth as a human being. She was adamant that our students needed to develop a sense of confidence and positive connections to our heritage as Aboriginal peoples. In participating in this study she noted how it was helpful to be more conscious about whom we are, to know our roots and think about our futures. She stated:

> *This is such an empowering experience to be affirmed and acknowledge that finally you realize your value and worth. Then you move on toward fulfilling your potential as a human being. For many people this is a rough road, however, in the long run it results in much positive energy. Often we prevent one another from realizing this goal by being so grounded (sic) in Eurocentric oppression that we slow the process down for our communities as a whole. However, as we group together [such as ATC]*

*we gain strength and we are more effective in reaching a point where we can celebrate and assert our heritage.*

This theme of affirmation in our heritage is one, which, most of the participants in this study seemed to support. This idea is indeed refreshing for positive self-worth is what it needed in our schools, for all children.

### *8.12 Elsie O t'atchanookewin*

How does one determine what makes up Aboriginal identity? This question came to mind as Elsie spoke about her immersion or as critical writers might state 'assimilation' into Christianity through the many churches in her community. She commented on how going to church became easy for her community because this was the one opportunity for people to gather in settings where they could be together without outside interference or hassles from Indian Affairs officials. She said that gatherings were important for her people and meeting through church functions replaced meeting through other Aboriginal functions:

> *I guess you know for me I grew up on a reservation, three churches on my reservation, my parents attended the United Church but I laugh sometimes...when I see that we go to church because we are also very traditional...My family, and I was adopted by a Native family, were involved with the church. My mother was in the women's auxiliary and served all her life as consoler, helper, baker, seller and so on for church activities".*

Elsie, an educator who is near retirement, was born on a reserve where she spoke her language. She has been involved in Aboriginal focussed positions since she started to work although she did not incorporate the spiritual and

cultural aspects of her background she most certainly did through her outreach/activism work in the community. She has been involved with friendship centres and other groups that had to do with the improving the quality of lives of Aboriginal peoples in the inner city of Winnipeg, Manitoba. I would suggest that she supported the efforts for affirming and rekindling of culture, language and spirituality although she did not necessarily 'see' that this is indeed what she was doing. Elsie simply saw herself as someone who worked for her people, especially children who needed the most support.

When Elsie reflected upon her identity and thought about what she learned that was considered traditional:

> *My grandmother picked ginger (traditional medicine) and I'd help her. She also used other traditional remedies for our family use. I still prefer traditional fish, bannock, wild meat and berries. Just could never get off on hamburgers and fries...yes (laughter from the group, an understanding of this preference that reflected cultural differences). My father, who passed away at 84 years old this spring, saw ceremonies when he was young. He forfeited a 'traditional' education because he went to residential school. Before he died he gave me a "stone" to keep; it had been passed on to him.*

"Stones" are considered to hold sacred and cultural significance in Aboriginal thought and it might be different for different cultural linguistic groups (cultural/spiritual knowledge I have experienced/heard from elder teachings). This is what Elsie what alluding to when she spoke about the stone her father passed on to her. Did he hope that she might "pick up" the teachings and carry them forward? The term 'pick up' is refereed to the understanding that traditional teachers in the Aboriginal community carry a bundle and in this bundle (wrapped

in a cloth or hide) are usually sacred items (feather, sweet grass, pipes, stones, medicines among other items) that are Aboriginal symbols of teachings/philosophies. So, it is common for many traditional teachers and Elders to carry a bundle. "Picking up a bundle" usually means that someone is working with the symbols as part of his or her work grounded in Aboriginal knowings and processes. She did not discuss what her father wanted her to do with the stone; my guess is that she will soon know.

Elsie had talked about some of the traditional activities as part of her upbringing and because of the influence of Christianity she does not take active part in the traditions although she is supportive of them. As her words here indicate, because she recognized that the children needed help and because of her involvement in advocacy work to improve the quality of education for Aboriginal students she did not get too involved in Aboriginal spirituality:

> *When I was student teaching in an inner city in 73, I was distressed by the 'stress' I observed in young Aboriginal children. I vowed then I would work in the inner city to see if I could make a difference. I wonder if I have? I respect those "who have come into their own". I have never felt worthy [to express Aboriginal spirituality] because of time, energy and commitment needed to fully benefit from a traditional path. Also, I value my Christian upbringing and have a love and respect for family members for whom it brings contentment.*

### 8.13 Lana O t'atchanookewin,

Lana, a Metis Ojibway woman spoke about the time she realized that she was different and that this difference had to do with her identity as an "Indian". Recall that this is the same term that other participants had difficulty with

understanding and/or relating to because of its historic significance and now because of its legal significance. Her parents did not talk about their backgrounds but she recalled spending many summers with her Cree grandparents who maintained much of their traditional skills and knowledge about the land, and language. She did not think of them at that time as being "different" from the mainstream. She talked about how she enjoyed these outings that she considered as 'adventures'. Reflecting on these times spent with her grandparents she said, *"You know grandpa was very traditional then, I never knew that he was but I think back about all the things he did and knew then, I know now what he was doing, I can see it".* She realized now how this knowledge has contributed to how she viewed herself for a long time. It was only when she was made to feel different through her interaction with school mates that she questioned her identity.

When Lana talked about her current position as an educator and her development of Aboriginal perspectives, she related how she got involved in different classrooms to gain the skills of working in different situations. Lana was clear about wanting to work with Aboriginal students so she chose to work in schools where large numbers of Aboriginal students attended. When she was teaching, she said:

> *I've been in every class, I've done ELENS (English as a second language for native students), migrancy and ah I enjoy it. I really enjoy the students that I work with and because I grew up not knowing my culture and not knowing who I was. Now I'm really strongly into teaching them about their culture.*

### *8.14 Raquel O t'atchanookewin*

Like many of the participants, Raquel was angry about and critical of the atrocities committed by residential school officials and the multigenerational negative impacts to residential school survivors and their descendants (Report of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, 1996). She referred to her family as a unit that suffered from these impacts. She pointed to the particular focus of the loss of her Indigenous language. Raquel spoke of her mother who was in a residential school for most of her young life. When her mother got out of that institution she married and had children who did not benefit from the Cree culture and ways of her mother:

> *One of the things that happened that kept us (her mother and her) at odds for a long time is that my mother watched so many children being abused and suffers including herself for speaking their language. And as a teenager and meeting residential school kids who come to Assiniboine residential school and listening to them speak Cree it was only it was something I didn't see as my right?*

Raquel was obviously affected in that she thought that she did not have the right to learn the language of her mother. He mother thought like so many residential school survivors that she was protecting her children by not teaching them their Mother language, which, in this case was Cree:

> *Because one of the things that mom said early on in my life is that you will not suffer because you are Cree, and you will not suffer because of the Cree language. And so, in her mind, in her head and in her heart she was doing something that was good. However, I was very angry about that for many, many years for not having our first language and I didn't even know if that's what I was angry at.*

In spite of the disconnection to language and culture, Raquel's parents instilled in her the importance of looking after 'your own' in that they were active in improving the social and cultural conditions of Aboriginal people who moved into the city. This way the principles of advocacy and caring were passed on to Raquel and her siblings who were raised in the city of Winnipeg. Therefore, from the time she was a young woman, Raquel was active in many Aboriginal focussed social movements, just like her parents. She became more involved in traditional cultural and spiritual ways since the 70's and since has found out that her mother knew more about Aboriginal knowings and processes than she was willing to share or felt able to share. For Raquel, it was a natural progression to transfer this kind of work into her teaching over the years. As time went on she became quite involved and immersed in traditional ceremonies, Pow Wows, circle teachings and she was a member of many social activist organizations for quite some time. So for Raquel, her identity is tied to the political as well as cultural and spiritual. She has lamented about how her mother's residential school experiences has *"deprived me of my first language and First Nationhood for many years".* However, as it is evident in her story, this did not totally stop her from becoming involved, she is one of the many people who have "picked up the bundle" to carry it forward.

### *8.15 Barbara O t'atchanookewin*

*It wasn't until I went to university when I first realized, that's how unaware I was I guess. I was doing a paper on Native education one time*

*and looking at the Hawthorn report (the Hawthorn report examines the experiences of "Indians" and their relationship to education) and realizing after having read that how deliberately the government set us up to assimilate us and just that feeling of hatred! I got physically ill that day just looking [at the Hawthorn report] you know (she laughs as she talks, laughs out of disbelieve at the memory of her experience) it was such an eye opener! And it was just an awful thing when I realized that generations of us were going through the system. So I think that it was then that the seed had been planted for me. It was another 15 years before I started to explore who I was as an Aboriginal person and during those years I became a teacher, I taught, and yet taught not from my own perspective but from a very Eurocentric perspective.*

When I heard Barbara speak these words I felt her pain and anger as she spoke. She pounded her fist on the desk when she recalled this experience. The laughter was that of shock. I have known Barbara for over 10 years now and this was the first time I heard her story. I had the impression that she was always immersed in Aboriginal culture and language, and she is now, but I had no idea that she had blocked that expression for so many years. She is a fluent Ojibway language speaker so I simply assumed that she was culturally and spiritually knowledgeable because for so many years she has openly advocated for changes in the system. I think that this is the mistake many of us make about what kind and what level of knowledge Aboriginal people might have about ourselves. Many people were disconnected from their culture/spirituality and language, making these kinds of assumptions is hurtful for everyone. Listening to Barbara's story has certainly made me more cognizant of what it is/is not we know. I am reminded of my own development and mindful of what I have learned in the past years of my involvement in Aboriginal education – there was much that I did not know before.

When Barbara worked for Indian Affairs, she felt like she was betraying her traditions and her people. She was aware of the inequities and racism in the system but she felt that she needed to try and create changes 'from the inside'. *"On the one hand you feel as if...you are betraying your own kind and yet you are having to do work within those parameters so it's as if you are walking uphill all the time".* She went on to talk about the movement in the 70's when Aboriginal people were openly resisting assimilation and asserting, reclaiming, rekindling ceremonies and traditions. *"Even though the movement came in the seventies where the Aboriginal peoples were kind of looking to the past in order to understand where we are at today and to look to the future. That movement began in the seventies and it's now of course an everyday act for many of us".*

When Barbara spoke about her identity and her understanding of culture and language, she referred to the residential school experiences where she 'lived' from age 5 to sixteen. Even as this happened she said,

> *I still managed to learn about my traditions from my parents. This maintaining of traditions were done in subtle ways and I did not even realise that they were teachings until I was well in adulthood. My dad was a spiritual and medicinal healer who also had the gift of story telling. He passed these teachings on to his family and for that I am most grateful.*

It was only after she read the Hawthorn report that Barbara took careful stock of how she and her family had been affected by mainstream oppression and forced assimilation of our peoples. Barbara continues to use her work as a 'space' to advance Aboriginal knowings and processes. Today, she expresses her identity through her work as an educator.

### 8.16 Beatrice O t'atchanookewin,

Beatrice has grown up in a Metis community adjacent to the First Nation community of her mother. She did not get an opportunity to understand the cultural and spiritual ways of her people when she was young. This only happened when she was studying her degree then when she was teaching Aboriginal students. She stated that:

> *I really enjoy the social science aspect and there is always more Native history to work with and they (the students) always have questions in the circle about culture. More and more inside I feel that there is so much more of it to learn....like Charlotte was talking about going to school...I was thinking about how when I didn't get a chance to go to school till very late, I didn't have my grade 12 and I was ready to work,*

but an opportunity came where Beatrice could study to become a teacher. What she didn't count on was the process of reconnecting and rekindling her ancestral heritage. Beatrice shared more stories where she was in the process of uncovering and understanding our experiences with oppression, assimilation, and racism. She feels that she can only do so much with what she knows in this process of reclaiming and developing confidence in her Aboriginal identity. She has been a great source of support for the students under her care in her school and for the ATC.

### *8.17 Freda O t'atchanookewin*

Freda was born and raised on a reserve (First Nation Community) – she used the term 'reserve'. She went to a residential school when she was 15 to go

to high school. Her family are staunchly immersed into the Catholic religion and she claimed that she was fine with this experience. Freda did not get to participate in any Aboriginal traditional activities that had to do with reclaiming culture, language and spirituality and she said that she did not plan to do so. This is interesting because she has worked with inner city Aboriginal children who she does recognize as having faced discrimination and racism. However, she simply wants to teach what is in the curriculum. She did note that her family spent much time in their cultural milieu, *"fishing and trapping camps every year".* She stated that her *"parents are very strong Catholics and so am I".*

For Freda, going to a residential school "*did not change my attitude at all*"; she felt that we just do what we believe is right. Freda did not perceive the residential schools as all that bad, as what others have reported about them. She believed that, *"If people take the positive side of their experiences they would have a better chance at dealing with the negative part of their lives. There is such a thing as forgive and forget and let go, in order to get on in life".* Freda is feeling a sense of loyalty to her Catholic faith and saying anything that is contrary to that is 'not right'. Has Freda not yet awakened to the historic atrocities of residential schools or that denial is taking place? This is a question to consider in a respectful way. Is Freda one of those teachers who believe that s/he simply wants to teach and not appear to take any 'political' position about what has happened to Aboriginal peoples. Critical theorists/educators suggest that all education is political (Dei, 1996, McLaren, 1994). How long will Freda be

able to carry out this kind of thinking? I did appreciate the fact that she took the courage to state what was on her mind and participate in this study. It is also a reminder that there are Aboriginal peoples who are still "duped into Eurocentric thinking" as related by Casey's story. There is a lot of work to be done to unravel the Eurocentric hold on our peoples and to move from old assimilationist models of education (Battiste, 1995) to models of self-determination.

### *8.18 Kelsey O t'atchanookewin*

Kelsey was another teacher who did not get involved in any activities that had to do with Aboriginal rekindling, reconnecting or reclaiming of culture, language or spirituality. She stated that she was comfortable with this decision. She indicated that her simply teaching and trying to be a good teacher is good enough for the students. She indicated that she was raised on a farm and attended a small rural community school. *"We were a part of the community and church. Strong family care and supports were in place. We maintained our own identity and Metis traditions in a Metis/white community. We had our share of racial discrimination but together we were able to resolve problems".* It is interesting to see that she mentioned Metis traditions but she does not elaborate on what these were for her. Her connection to the Catholic Church was important for her and I am guessing that if she were to draw from Aboriginal perspectives in her teaching she might feel that she is being disloyal to her church.

### 8.19 Adrienne O t'atchanookewin

Adrienne is a Metis woman who speaks her language with fluency. She has taught for over 25 years in various schools across the province of Manitoba with clear indications of supports for Aboriginal students. When she spoke about her identity and developing Aboriginal perspectives, she stated that *"My parents were not traditional. My Dad was an orphan at age seven. However, he has told me that his mother used to attend sweats. That life was lost to him though when she died. My mother's family was Roman Catholic and was always terribly afraid to do something 'wrong' [that might go against Catholic traditions]".*

Adrienne conveyed the first time that she was able to become more familiar with her culture was when she took a course at the summer institute for Aboriginal education:

> *In 1991, I had my very first opportunity to become familiar with my heritage. I was taking the First Native Summer Institute...Since then, I continued to grow and learn about my culture. I am just now starting to understand and truly appreciate the richness of my heritage. I am also at the point now where I can truly express myself about my heritage in any situation.*

I found it interesting to learn about this news because Adrienne has always been involved in Metis cultural activities for many years. Perhaps, she is thinking that Aboriginal culture as those only related to traditional ceremonies such as sweat lodges, smudging and so on? Again, this reminds me of how we must be careful about how we communicate what Aboriginal culture is all about. It definitely has many aspects and we must keep in mind that Metis culture is part of Aboriginal culture and that it should not be considered different and therefore outside of

that domain. Albeit, it is a culture that appeared post-contact but it has a lot of traditional ways inherent in it.

### *8.20 Ruth O t'atchanookewin*

Ruth is a young First Nation Ojibway woman who has taught for over 5 years. Her teaching sites have been in places where there are a large number of Aboriginal students. Her family is strongly immersed in Christianity but she indicated that because she was raised *"on a reserve...naturally [Aboriginal identity] is a strong part of my upbringing...My father is English and my mother is Ojibway and I've always identified with the Aboriginal side as I have always lived on the reserve as a child".* Ruth has not participated in any public activities that has to do with Aboriginal cultural and spiritual connections outside of her teaching. Perhaps, like some of the participants she has not come to that realization/analysis of the historic oppression, cultural genocide, oppressive policies etc, that is, what has happened to Aboriginal people after contact and this is yet to come.

### *8.21 Jacinta O t'atchanookewin*

Jacinta shared some perspectives on her understanding of identity and connecting to Aboriginal perspectives in education. She has always been a supportive volunteer at gatherings that the ATC held. When Jacinta related her thoughts about identity and Aboriginal traditions, she stated that:

*Aboriginal traditions, culture and heritage were not a part of my upbringing for I have been raised in a residential school. I have been in a United and Presbyterian Church/faith School from the time I began grade 5 till grade eleven. My mom thought it was best that we attend residential school because of poverty on the reserve that we experienced. We were a large family and she wanted us to get a good education and eventually a job that would help us fit in with the rest of society. ....The development of my Aboriginal heritage has always been there. It has been set aside for a long while, but as a child you learn to live with the now. You never lose sight of your younger years...I have never lost my heritage. However, I have lost a lot of family, home and cultural experiences of a reserve. I became bitter because I felt lost in the two worlds, like the world of the reserve versus the world of the residential school. Towards the end of my grade XI I began to feel more acceptable at the residential school.*

It is evident from Jacinta's words that she is aware of the historic oppressions of residential schools. Perhaps in time she will join others in the process of rekindling Aboriginal knowings and processes through her educational responsibilities.

### *8.22 Marilyn' O t'atchanookewin*

Marilyn is close to retirement and she has been an avid supporter of Aboriginal students for most of her teaching career. She stated that she did not really have the kinds of supports and encouragement to 'reclaim' Aboriginal perspectives in education as she was one of the few Aboriginal teachers in the system where she has worked for over 25 years. In sharing her views about identity and Aboriginal development she shared the following words:

*I was fortunate to have a good stable upbringing in the Aboriginal community. My foster parents worked hard to see I had an appreciation for both cultures. I was in a United Church home in [a community away from my home] at 14 years old and was with girls from many ethnic groups. I was the only Aboriginal [girl] and I had a positive experience....I*

*have appreciated my Aboriginal heritage but I raised my own family in "white" society so they would have the best of education. I have not pursued my Aboriginal status as my brothers and sisters have. I would like to pursue my identity now. My daughters only concern was where would I be buried. She thought that these things were dictated by becoming a status Aboriginal [Indian]".*

It is interesting to note here that Marilyn raised her children so they have the 'best' of education. Like Barbara and others, Marilyn made this choice as a young woman. In their mature years they pondered about the wisdom of this choice and are now trying to find ways to reconnect to their heritage and community. I wonder if she now believes that this was the right choice to keep her children from knowing their Aboriginal heritage. Marlin's husband is white (non-Indian), therefore, she lost her 'status' as an 'Indian' when they got married. She has considered applying for reinstatement as a 'status Indian' just as her siblings have, but it is something that has been on her mind to do. It is clear that her children are concerned that if she becomes 'status Indian' that certain 'rules' must apply to being an 'Indian'. Perhaps, this is evidence of some level of understanding of the level of oppression visited upon Aboriginal people.

# CHAPTER 9

## *Atchanookewina* (Stories)

## REKINDLING AND ASSERTING ABORIGINAL KNOWINGS AND PROCESSES IN COMPLEX SPACES

### *9.1 Bert O t'atchanookewin*

Bert contended that he has always enjoyed working with Aboriginal people, which he was able to do from his first teaching job in the seventies. His way of advancing Aboriginal education was to be involved with the people and providing services that might not be available in the community. For example, he tutored students and wrote letters for community members who asked for this kind of help. Once he was in the community and the word was out that he was Native, people would come and ask for help. Bert was eager to support when he could.

Bert stated that he worked from what he considered to be an Aboriginal perspective for a long time. It is just when there was more openness about drawing from Aboriginal materials and resources, and cultural/spiritual symbols that he was able to be more open about their use in his classes. He shared a concern about the lack of openness he has experienced when using the notion of 'Trees' as knowledge providers and working with circles in the classroom. He

explained how his colleagues resisted this kind of teaching. In spite of the resistance he said:

> *I used sharing circles in formal school systems to develop programs that were Aboriginal in focus. I did this once I learned how to incorporate this into teaching. A lot of what happens in Aboriginal education has been positive but some people who have control still shy away from this kind of programming...There is the threat of using the Talking Stone in these settings [schools in northern communities] as people are afraid and they often feel that this clashes with the Christian philosophies. They are not sure how to accept this. So I need to do a lot of work to get them to see the value here.*

Bert shared the problem of "*lots of hang-ups in using...Aboriginal models*" and that may educators are still stuck of the notion that the mainstream perspective is the way to go.

He advances the idea that spirituality in education needs attention. "*Any sense of ceremony is lacking in the larger society. I missed this in organizations where I worked and smudging is not welcomed. It's the symbolic act that keeps me grounded. I try to find way of staying grounded*".

Bert went on to talk about finding resources and idea that seem to support and/or fit with Aboriginal perspectives, one of these resources is that of an educator whose work he has utilized.

> *There are seven ways of knowing that I am aware of that Gardner wrote about and students need to know this where we work with our bodies, movement, mind, music, tactile senses for example. Aboriginal perspectives work well with these approaches.*

What is evident from Bert's practice is that he deliberately seeks out materials and resources that reflect Aboriginal perspectives in education and incorporates them into his work. He is aware that not everyone will support his

approach and perspectives and he accepted this realization. Bert recognized that doing things Aboriginal is looking beyond the mainstream and looking at alternatives, he recalled some words of wisdom from an elder whom he was working with:

> *I think it is important to consider alternative ways to do things that are Aboriginal. We need to think this through. An Elder once told me 'We learn to survive with the book ways. We don't let it get to us. We'll come back to that time when we need to know how to survive in this world [in nature]'. In my different situations in my role as an educator, I always find ways to be a helper in whatever way I can."*

So in this way, Bert asserts Aboriginal philosophies and perspectives. In order to educate himself in Aboriginal traditions, Bert talked about the different activities that helped him develop this commitment, he has attended Sweatlodge ceremonies as a high school teacher/counsellor. He has practised smudging personally and occasionally in the classroom. He has used Sweetgrass in communities...and he has visited the Red Willow Lodge (this lodge is nurtured by two Elders and they provide cultural and spiritual teaching to those who seek this out). Furthermore, whenever he could, Bert advocated on behalf of Aboriginal students, whose issues needed to be brought to the level of attention and action.

### *9.2 Sandra O t'atchanookewin*

In her work to research and develop culturally relevant teaching materials and providing curriculum support to teachers and parents, Sandra talked about how she worked to connect teachers to the materials they needed. The schools she served are situated throughout the province and in some cases the only

method of access to the community was by plane. She expressed her concern that the teachers need to be able to access relevant resources in spite of their geographic location. Sandra attempted to make the teachers and parents aware of potential resource sites and contact people. She talked about working with a committee of parents and teachers that could decide what kind of curriculum should be in their schools. She also talked about the importance of school committees that guide the teachers to what kind of materials they would like to see in the classroom. In spite of her work, Sandra felt that she is obliged to follow the provincial curriculum which, is finally coming around to paying more attention to Aboriginal education perspectives. When she was talking about curriculum relevance and teaching the students about cultural ways of the communities in which they live, Sandra stated,

> *What the committee wants is okay, we [the committee] want what we would like to teach. What's relevant in our [communities]...And each of the communities is different from over here* (she is referring to the city)*....So again this teachers' guide helps them put some of that culture in there so that they learn a little bit about this and to teach that to the kids...And it's the little things like that that do make a big difference when you are in that school.*

In this foregoing passage, Sandra is also talking about the fact that even with the little bit of cultural relevance that can be encouraged in the communities is what can make the difference in that school because many of these schools do not have the same resources (access to sites, materials and people) as urban schools. This is one reason for having a committee that can seek out resources whether these are in the community or outside. Sandra talked about local

community people coming into the schools as the committee invited them to support the school curriculum as part of asserting Aboriginal perspectives in education.

### *9.3 Sammy O t'atchanookewin*

Sammy posited that Aboriginal education with its inclusive principles *"...works for all children in terms of methodology".* She offered her opinion about the current curriculum, *"what's missing...is that Aboriginal students don't see themselves in the curriculum".* This theme is what many antiracism educators take up in discussion about exclusive curriculum ( Banks, 1994; Dei, 1996; Lee, 1985) that many minority students do not 'see' themselves in the curriculum. She reiterated that 'doing' Aboriginal education is inclusive because Aboriginal thought acknowledges diversity and people from all races without posing a hierarchical ranking. All people are considered a part of a human family within a circle of sharing equal locations in that 'not one is better than the other'.

Sammy went on to talk about what has happened when she used Aboriginal methodologies/approaches to her teaching. She said,

> *One year when I integrated some of the special Ed kids into the classroom where I was teaching. And I did some lessons on Aboriginal content and some of the parents both white and Aboriginal told me that their children were really happy in my classroom...I brought in parents, Aboriginal parents, if I knew that they had some skills, knowledge that they could share. For example, I invited one parent who talked about how to make (tan) hide leather. The parent even read a book related to tanning. She talked to the students about how to soften the leather and how to tan it.*

Parents were curious about what Sammy was doing in the classroom as the children went home and talked about what they learned. Upon hearing from Sammy, the parents seemed pleased with what they were learning. Sammy was pleased that both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal parents made the effort to find out what she was teaching.

Sammy was involved in a number of activities that reflected Aboriginal content, perspectives, and culture and language some of which she attempts to bring to the classroom when she felt she had the freedom to do so. In spite of the interest to teach Aboriginal content it is still a matter of whether or not the teacher will be supported by his/her administration.

Sammy outlined the various activities she has participated in over the course of her teaching. These are activities that she has attempted to bring into the classroom in one form or another:

> *I have been involved in organizing, participating, co-organizing drum teachings, feasts, give-aways, Sweatlodge ceremonies, tobacco teaching, pow wows, pipe ceremony, medicine picking and teachings, teachings by Elders and traditional teachers, Four Worlds Healing Conference, women's teaching circles, sharing circles, cradle board teachings. I have been involved in learning more about Aboriginal traditions, spirituality and culture since the early 80's. But growing up in a Metis community I learned and practised Metis traditions, culture and spirituality.*

What Sammy doesn't talk about here is that she also taught Metis square dancing to groups of kids. There were a couple of other participants that also taught square dancing and jigging.

### *9.4 Sara O t'atchanookewin*

Sara integrated Aboriginal issues reflective of human rights and diversity into her work as a teacher. She has advocated for Aboriginal students for cultural relevance in their classrooms and in the way they are treated by the system.

> *I am vocal, I am advocating for our children they [mainstream colleagues] needed to adjust how they treat me what they talk about, and what they don't talk about. And that says a lot to me...I stand up in staff meetings and I talk about workshops in Aboriginal education.*

Sara advocated openly for teachers to take interest in orientating themselves to the thinking behind the content of Aboriginal education. Although Sara was not directly teaching from a cultural perspective (her identification with being Aboriginal is a recent act for her) she was certainly supportive of what needed to happen to pay attention to Aboriginal perspectives in education. She worked at helping the student with self-esteem issues around their heritage. I suggest that this is another form of working to assert Aboriginal perspectives in education, the go beyond limiting Aboriginal education to cultural/language dimensions. Sara's parents have denied being Aboriginal (and they still did) for many years and she was taught to believe that she was French (and she is of mixed French/Aboriginal heritage) when any mention of difference was discussed. The discussion of the Aboriginal mix was avoided and denied. It was when Sara was a teacher that she started to ask questions about her identity as she remembered being treated differently in her schooling years. When she found out that she had Aboriginal heritage she went full steam ahead to explore what

this was and went on to integrate Aboriginal perspectives in the best way she could:

> *When I work with the kids I always talk to them about their heritage to understand who they are, where they come from, where they want to go in life, what they want to leave behind in our building for the people after them. Trying to help them understand that they have a responsibility to the whole, to the community....they understand and they respond to this. And the response is so great. We have a community gathering and like I said...it just seems like everything is falling into place. I've been so afraid that the response won't be great and [now] we are going to have a minimum of 350 people and I think we are going to get funding and at that gathering we will talk to parents about programs in the school and we will invite the community to come to a part of our schools. Not to come in and try to find a way to fit into it but to begin to think about what they want for their children and what they want for our community and what could we do to allow that to happen, somewhere in their education will happen but it will be the system that will have to answer to them. And I think that's the way to do it so that our children don't live their lives in denial.*

### *9.5 Casey O t'atchanookewin*

Casey was another participant who spoke about his reconnection to the Aboriginal community that he had denied for most of his life. It was when he became a teacher's aide and entered university that he started to question his background. He said he always knew that he was 'mixed' but that did not mean anything for him because any discussion about this was avoided. Now he immerses himself into Aboriginal perspectives in education and advocating for Aboriginal students. He has worked at educating himself through readings in the field, conferences on Aboriginal education, participating and supporting Aboriginal community events, discussions with colleagues and traditional

teachers, and talking to his own family. One of the things he has enjoyed doing is developing a Native History class which, he says *"I piloted in my school".* He was surprised and pleased that Aboriginal students really responded to his work. When he piloted this course he was surprised at all the information he learned and that made him even more adamant that Aboriginal education needed to be taken seriously by students, educators and the administration. He has taken this unit and presented it at a conference where he received much positive feedback and that was an uplifting experience for him. *"I get great feedback and people want to know more".* Casey spoke out against inequities that he observed in his school and sometimes he gets in difficult situations with his colleagues because his colleagues took the stance he took as confrontational. However, he felt that Aboriginal students needed someone to advocate for them also he felt that too many teachers do not do enough advocating for cultural relevancy in education.

### *9.6 Rachel O'tatchanookewin*

Rachel has been a strong advocate of advancing Aboriginal content, perspectives and knowings into the curriculum for all students. She started her teaching career in a special program for kids that did not 'fit' within the regular system and she was confronted with the wisdom of this decision. Rachel made a decision to begin her teaching career in this setting initially 'just to get into the system' because this was also around the same time that Aboriginal teachers graduating from an Access support program were having difficulties getting

hired. There was a general unfounded perception that Aboriginal graduates of Access Program received second class 'training'. (Access Programs were affirmative action programs where high need students received academic, personal and social supports that would maximize their success at graduating from teacher education and other degree programs. Upon graduation they had the same type of training as did the mainstream and more because of the inner city focus they had to learn in their programs). Rachel said:

> *The comments that I heard from the community was, from Aboriginal People, was that are we being ghettoeized. Were We being ghettoeized by being put into these programs...and the question was why didn't they allow Aboriginal teachers to go into the mainstream to show that we are capable just doing what other teachers do. Anyway, I thought about that I didn't necessarily agree with that because a lot of our [Aboriginal] kids are in these special programs.*

As is evident from her words, Rachel is very protective of our kids in the school system. Rachel felt fortunate to have many opportunities to integrate Aboriginal perspectives and knowings into her practice. In reference to a school site where she could do this on an everyday basis, she remarked, *"Oh my god, it was so intense. We did all the things that we could ever wanna imagine we could do with the school in terms of the Aboriginal culture and content. Yes, we did it!"* In relating the kinds of activities she was able to carry out that reflected an Aboriginal focus Rachel stated:

> *I was a cultural coordinator, that was my job...we were using the medicine wheel philosophy and I even wrote a paper...[on] how it could work in the school ...all those ideas didn't come from me. They came from the book "the Sacred Tree" (by Bob, Bob, Brown & Lane, 1988) curriculum and I just used that and I [adapted] expanded it.*

Rachel was glad to be able to talk about the 'chances' she had to assert Aboriginal perspectives in her work. She used humour and laughter as she spoke about her work. For example when she was talking about what was significant for her she said:

> *For me the most significant thing is to maintain my identity and my spirituality, my salary (laughter). I don't want to lose that (freedom to incorporate cultural perspectives) I want to continue. There is so much...I really believe that there is a lot happening in our community and I haven't lost that hope and belief even though I have been through hell (she is referring to the stressful experiences and backlash she received from her colleagues because of speaking out against racism directed at her and/or Aboriginal students) with my workplace. I hope I never lose that its part of me it a part of who I am? And I will never give that up. There's just so much that needs to be done in our community.*

A theme that appears in this passage that is similar to other voices in this thesis is that of giving, helping, and assisting our community in other words; service to the community. Hampton (1993), an Aboriginal scholar of education, suggested several "propositions as steps towards a theory of Indian Education" (14), one of these being "Indian education is service-oriented" (15) in attempting to define Aboriginal education. Rachel words spoke volumes of giving back to the community.

### *9.7 Anna O t'atchanookewin*

When Anne graduated from her degree program, she intended to work with inner city Aboriginal students, but judging from her words she probably did not think through the kinds of content/process she would be working with in the curriculum. I posit that she figured that the provincial curriculum is what she

would be working with even though her desire was to work with Aboriginal students. She wanted them to succeed in school, against all odds. However, she did have a difficult time 'getting into the system' much like many of her colleagues did. After holding a few term positions, she applied for a teaching position where she was finally offered an option to teach Native languages, so she *"jumped at the chance to teach here".* The other classes she was asked to teach were Aboriginal arts and grafts though she questioned the motives behind why the administrators asked her to teach these classes. She voiced her concern about 'tokenism' and wondered if *"deep inside I thought well...why they are hiring me?"* Anna cautioned that we must guard against token hiring. She took the position because, at least finally, she could work with inner city Aboriginal students. Anna recalled the challenges of being one of two Aboriginal teachers in the school where she was expected to do all the Aboriginal content and extra curricular activities with the students. She expressed her concerns:

> *[The other teacher] didn't want to be involved in organizing any cultural activities whatsoever, so I was asked. So I thought on the one hand I didn't want to be seen as a 'token Indian' then I thought of it in different ways. And I thought to myself, yeah why not? I want to organize something that reflects an Aboriginal perspective here, because I thought if I don't do it I thought who is going to do it?*

In spite of the difficult situation, she enjoyed working with Aboriginal content/culture, as she was able to connect with Aboriginal students through these opportunities.

Before Anna was hired to teach in school, she held other educational positions in advancing Native languages across the province and she was keen

about the fact that she was able to work and learn from Elders and other Native languages speakers. So in this way she was advancing/asserting Aboriginal perspectives in Education. Following this assignment, she was able to get in the WSD#1 in a class where a large number of the students were Aboriginal. From what she has shared, I gather that she did not think through what this might mean in the long run. For example when she was asked to make an Aboriginal 'cultural contribution' to a school open house she felt stressed and pressured but she was able to organize the training of Hoop Dancers and having their outfits made. She expressed her gratitude that a teacher's assistant helped her with making the outfits in order to satisfy the contribution to the Open House:

> *So, I guess that was our contribution to the open house you know at that time. Like I really spent a lot of time because after school I would spend time with the students making arts and crafts...Also, I used a lot of Aboriginal content in the lessons and things that I was doing. I implemented a Cree community skid and they really enjoyed that. In fact, that last year that I was there I took them to the children's festival and twenty-one of them went to the Children's festival with me and they had this tent where the kids could make anything they wanted to. So my kids went in and all of them started to make teepees (laughs). All these multicultural kids, hey? And some of them can't even speak English here they are all making this Indian village and I thought that was kind of neat...and I still have pictures of that it was great. I still cherish those times that I had.*

When Anna took another position in another teaching site, she was pleased that the school was more open to developing Aboriginal focussed curriculum where the activities or resources were not just add-on's or after thoughts she said, *"It's not like your open house. All of a sudden you have to do something that's you know Aboriginal focussed you know. It was integrated into*

*the school activities and it was learning for everybody".* She referred to the last school where she had to contribute something to the open house and it was just considered token in her mind. According to Anna, it must be more than that. There are many Aboriginal, multicultural and antiracism educators who support this idea (Banks, 1994; Brant Castellano, 2000; Dei, 1996; Hampton, 1993; Lee, 1985).

While Anna appreciated the kinds of Aboriginal oriented knowledge (cultural, spiritual, historical etc), skills and attitudes the students were learning, she cautioned educators to be mindful about what we are teaching and how we are teaching, and our expectations of the students:

> *Like for me it takes years for me to eventually get a pipe some day. I think that it [immersion in cultural teachings] was happening too fast for the kids because they need time to digest, learn...digest what they are learning especially when we hear that these things takes years to learn well. I think I have too much respect for my culture to kind of treat it like that.*

Although, Anna has been taking part in various ceremonies and teachings for over 8 years, she does so primarily for her own and immediate familial needs. She feels that she will take it further when she feels it is the right time to do so.

Another concern that Anna shared is the expectation placed on educators who are Aboriginal is to know what Aboriginal education is and how to implement it in the classroom. She said the expectation is that we know how to teach and it was not anything that they learned about while enrolled in their degree programs. I argue that it is more the inability to articulate what Aboriginal education is that is the issue here, because for most of the participants and in

particular Anna the information is there in body, mind, soul it is just a matter of learning how to access it. However, as she stated:

> *In terms of the classroom we were put into a situation like where we had only two days of planning and we had to have this English language arts curriculum all of a sudden from an Aboriginal perspective. And I thought that was just so unfair, I thought how could the division possibly do that? How can they all of a sudden set up the school and expect teachers to kind of have this Aboriginal content at the tip of their fingers? (Snaps her fingers as she spoke)! Because no one was every really trained for it! That's the thing, I wasn't trained to teach grade nine and ten English language arts from an Aboriginal Perspective.*

She went on to talk about the extensive amount of time and energy that she spent in developing Aboriginal content in curriculum:

> *There were times when we spent long hours in the evening and right through weekends sometimes you know. And I think how did my family even survive because I spent a lot of time developing curriculum so that I could actually teach it the next day? I mean I'm talking about hours of preparation at night.*

Anna's words reflect a labour of dedication she needed to relevant curriculum materials for the classroom. At the same time, it points to the unfair workload that is placed on her and other educators who take on developing and asserting Aboriginal perspectives that were not included in their teacher education degrees as a major area of study. Unfortunately, this was precisely because Native education did not exist as a major nor teachable at the time of this research. Right now there is not a lot of readily available materials so the teachers end up researching, assessing and evaluating materials for cultural appropriateness, composing lessons plans and more. This is done in addition to

teaching the regular curriculum. This is a tremendous overload of work beyond an act of duty!

When Anna moved to yet another position, she was able to provide supports to a greater range of teachers through professional development workshops to assist them to integrate Aboriginal perspectives. She said:

> *I got to do a number of things, various workshops, you know with various schools in the division. And that was quite an experience they would throw that in as one of their optional pd (professional development) days...in the schools where Aboriginal education is an educational priority. So in some school they would say 'well maybe we could have one day...of pd (professional development) time on Aboriginal education or ELENS (English language education for Native students) programming. So when I go and do these sessions I really found them to be very on the spot kind of thing? And I didn't think that schools were very serious about inviting us, that sort of thing. And I would put a lot of time and preparation into it so I would conduct a half day or full day or whatever they wanted. So you know you catch on after a while it's really a tokenism on the part of the schools.*

The concern about tokenism emerges again according to Anna. Perhaps that this is a form of resistance that the mainstream has to support quality responses of Aboriginal education needs and aspirations. When Anna moved on to another position, it was something she was to enjoy because it had an Aboriginal language component to it, an area in which she had the skills to carry through:

> *It's an elementary school and I like elementary kids and this will give me an opportunity to...learn based on my own culture and based on my own experiences. I really wanted a school that promoted language and culture and that is something that I can assist in because it's in the school*

What is clear in Anna's story is that she is interested in asserting Aboriginal perspectives and philosophies through what she felt and recognized as her own areas of strength which, is in languages not cultural specific or historic

content. Rather, her challenge and resistance was primarily how these were imposed on her because of who she was: an Aboriginal woman who is a teacher and a speaker of her language, not because these were part of her training. She resisted tokenism and yet she continued to 'do the Aboriginal programming in her schools'.

### *9.8 Beatrice O t'atchanookewin*

Beatrice had a brief but critical voice to add to this theme of asserting Aboriginal perspectives in education. She relayed these words:

> *One of my concerns is that we should work with the teachers who are coming into the school and show them the way we teach at [the Aboriginal focussed school] according to the principles of the Medicine Wheel. They don't have cultural understanding of using the various medicines.*

This brief passage demonstrates Beatrice's concern about the lack of cultural relevant that the teachers receive when they are in teacher education. What is interesting to note here is that Beatrice would have been in the 'same boat' when she graduated from her degree? Her discussion of reclaiming and reconnecting to Aboriginal knowledge and processes is evident in the previous themes in her story. However having been in the school for a few years already, she was a seasoned teacher with cultural knowledge that she acquired during her time at the school. Perhaps too Beatrice realized that it is time that universities seriously take up offering courses that offer more than electives and 'pieces' within mainstream courses.

### *9.9 Robin O t'atchanookewin*

Robin's words here demonstrate another level of advancing Aboriginal perspectives and philosophies through political, parental, social and community involvement. She talked about one of her roles as an educator:

> *In that role I did a lot of clerical stuff but also ah tried to facilitate the process of...the division adopting the policy on Aboriginal education. That process was very gruelling because it was such a resistance from the white community to recognizing the policy on Aboriginal education. The first resistance being they already had a multicultural education policy. [They questioned] why would you want your own?...And we made the distinction that we are First Nations members on turtle Island and as such we want our children and others to know about the contributions our people had made in building this country. And that was a very unifying theme during the years that I was there.*

According to Robin, the WSD#1 board resisted the initial attempts to take a suggestion from the Aboriginal community that perhaps they ought to learn about Aboriginal philosophies, particularly the Medicine Wheel philosophy from some Elders selected by the community. Finally, as Robin stated, *"they agreed, the whole board... then [they] invited an Elder...he gave them the medicine wheel teachings and after that the policy was passed".* In spite of the policy being passed, Robin was still critical about the lack of seriousness toward the policy:

> *It is seven years and even now I would say ah that there isn't a clear division wide movement to honour that policy. Its left radically to anyone making the commitment to the educators the administrators at school as to how it gets done. And so there is not any systemic way it is enforced. It's not systemic".*

In another role she held as an educator, Robin was also involved in teaching and using Aboriginal symbols to assert Aboriginal perspectives in education, she stated:

> *If I'm going to teach anything to our kids now it is that they are First Nations, and they live on Turtle Island. And so all the motifs I worked with in my current job have to deal with the four directions, the four human families that we speak of, and then this place turtle island and turtle mountain on it and we teach the kids that you are very special because you are First Nations of this continent and Creator gave us this to look after. So this is our responsibility.*

Robin lamented about a concern she had with our lack of ability or confidence in promoting our own people for the kind of work we need to do. She indicated that there are a number of professionals who are Aboriginal and who have grounded their work in Aboriginal values and philosophies that we must find out about them then we must promote them. She shared these words with a sense of urgency in her voice:

> *Even in our own community we have a hard time promoting our own people. You know like Dr. Marten Brokenleg (a Lakota man from the United States who is also a Psychologist, a Medicine Pipe Carrier and an Anglican Priest)? I enjoyed his talks but what does he have? People say it's because he has a framework that people can connect with. It is definitely concrete and he suggested some outcomes that can be seen over time.*

Robin supported the idea that more Aboriginal educators need to hear people like Dr. Brokenleg to gain and/or deepen their knowledge of Aboriginal education. What is interesting here is the idea that the resistance to Aboriginal ways also comes from our own people, not just the mainstream.

Robin has pursued various learning activities in order to continue to educate herself about Aboriginal teachings, perspectives and philosophies. These have been retreats at a lodge, sitting in circles with colleagues, readings, and seeking out consultations with Elders on regarding educational/professional development needs. She has taken part in a Healing Circle with Aboriginal women regarding residential school experiences and sharing circles with Aboriginal parents. Further, she attends pipe ceremonies and Women's teachings, as she is able. She stated that *"My study...[on ceremonies] have been over the past 7 years".*

As a dedicated supporter of Aboriginal education initiatives and changes to the current curriculum Robin voiced her concerns that many demands are placed on Aboriginal educators like her. She was getting tired of the kinds of demands that were placed on her:

> *And know you what? From my remaining energies I haven't wanted to work inside the system anymore. I'm going to jolly well do what I think I need to do with my work. I'm less accommodating of that system that is so Eurocentric and I'm really learning about another way that seems to be really make a lot of sense for our own people.*

In spite of her feelings, Robin remained steadfast in advancing Aboriginal education.

### *9.10 Elsie O t'atchanookewin*

Elsie perceived herself as that kind of person who seeks to be diplomatic in her dealings with community, colleagues and students. She has always been

an active supporter of Aboriginal students in and out of school. As well, she saw that over time our children needed something more than what the system could provide:

> *I've always been a very diplomatic person and I've chosen to do things in a quiet manner in private with my classroom teachers in private with the superintendent. I just kind of say this kind of stuff is going on and it really makes me uncomfortable, those kinds of conversations. ...I've never really been a rallyer or you know a soapbox kind of person. ...I guess over the years...[for some people] as you get older in most instances you become complacent and you become resolved that you can't do anything. The other way has been true for me I don't have patience anymore I see things more clearly what kind of things are going on and you know you try and work with kids. Ah, the more I know the kids the more I know about their communities the less inclined I am to give them more pain in the schools because they already have lot of pain every place else. ...How we address issues with the children is very important and we are constantly putting into practice a punitive plan through the system. We <u>need</u> a healthy plan. We need to work with something like the Medicine Wheel concept of wellness. The system's very reluctant to look at those things.*

Elsie is near retirement and she is beginning to 'see' that she can get more involved in Aboriginal spirituality, something she felt that she just couldn't devote her time while she was teaching and administrating. It is important to note too that when she entered the school system the supports were absent for people who wanted to advance Aboriginal education in whatever they wanted. Elsie's gift to working for/in Aboriginal education has been to protect the children from undue pain and advocate in the system for more relevant and supportive curriculum. She felt that we must teach the teachers - particularly white teachers to treat our children with dignity. In her school she has employed sharing circles to deal with tough situations but cautioned about what can be learned here:

*I'm centering myself on something that is important to me and it's just in the last five or six years that I have been able to say, openly say, and comfortably say to people. 'I'm not comfortable with that, and I'll tell you why'. Like we do sharing circles when there is a crisis in the school and even if you talk to the staff ahead of time and you know explain they still walk away from the circle saying did we accomplish anything? And you know these are primarily white teachers.*

Elsie felt that over the years she made an impact on people (students, parents, administrators etc) and she welcomed the proliferation of literature, writings, Elders, traditional teachers in the last few years. *"I think I made a difference in the lives of our students. I enjoy the little conversations with the students and the parental trust I get with the parents. I have made an achievement in the community as an Aboriginal administrator".* It is difficult to think that Elsie will actually leave the work, even though she will leave her position. She will be an 'elder' in many ways for people coming to her for her wisdom gained from her years of teaching to advance Aboriginal education in her way.

### *9.11 Lana Ot'atchanookewin*

Lana worked in one school for over 7 years where she was able to develop her interest in making education relevant for the children. She has attempted to seek out materials and resources that could help her infuse her teaching to reflect Aboriginal perspectives in education. In doing this work she was also teaching herself what she needed to know because Aboriginal education was not included in her education degree. She has taken part in many

conferences, seminars and meetings where the topic was Aboriginal education for, and by Aboriginal people. Lana talked about one of the things she did to assert, to integrate Aboriginal perspectives in the classroom:

> *Every year I start my program, my school program with Aboriginal studies a little unit that I made? ...I teach them about the circle, and we have our sharing stone and stick and I teach them some lessons from the Medicine Wheel and about respect. I have about ten little areas that I thought were important? And I cover those and I teach them about the Pow Wow.*

Lana remarked that she got positive support from her principal, an Aboriginal educator who supported teachers in advancing Aboriginal education. For Lana, this kind of support was a great welcome. She usually gets calls from other schools, colleagues and friends who are interested to know what she is doing and they ask if she is willing to share her strategies. Therefore, Lana has made several presentations at conferences and schools.

### *9.12 Raquel O t' atchanookewin*

> *I guess the first place that I would start in my career, in thinking about it and looking at it in terms of integrating who I am, is through the wisdom of whatever it is those old ladies (Aboriginal relatives) that my mom involved me with when I was growing up. Because in spite of the urban upbringing my mother always had a crew of older women who knew us, who chastised us, who guided us, who mentored us, who role modelled for us. She exposed us to those seriously cultural women that just lived their life that way. They didn't make a big to do about ceremonies they just lived their life, they lived their life in the Pow Wow circuit, in the ceremonies circuit and in the teaching circuit.*

Raquel took what she learned from these women and just incorporated these into her work whenever she could, it was not always evident to her that this is what she was actually doing. A theme that was similar to other

participants who 'just did it'. Further to her early immersion in this lifestyle, Raquel indicated that since 1970 she has formally attended ceremonies of all kinds: teachings from the lodges, Pipes, smudges, women and elder gatherings. Raquel felt that in her earlier practice as an educator she worked from principles that reflected Aboriginal values. However it was not until she began to reflect upon her teaching patterns did she realize that her Aboriginal upbringing had a great influence on her teaching. It was about mid-way into her career when she began to assert more cultural teachings/symbols in the classroom.

Some of the earlier work that Raquel did was that of protecting our children from going back to the streets. She had worked in one high school where the intent was to provide schooling for those Aboriginal children who were not making it in other schools and who were on the streets. Raquel related how one school was organized to meet the needs of these students. Raquel lamented on how this school that had this specific focus was forced to close. However, after feeling that she could only do so much, she resigned herself to the 'politics and powers' that instituted a new school that took another away under the *"naïve assumption that the new school would meet all Aboriginal students' needs".*

When Raquel went into another high school to teach, she was more overt about integrating Aboriginal perspectives in her teaching. At this school she made sure regional cultural symbols were openly displayed so that people could see them when they entered the school. Some of these symbols were related to

shelter, arts and crafts, and teachings. When she taught whether it was university course or high school classes she integrated Aboriginal teachings and ways of knowing. Because she is also a Pipe Carrier she is able to bring more traditional/spiritual practices into her work as she is called upon to do so. She has been a presenter at numerous workshops and conferences for this specific purpose of passing on her knowledge of Aboriginal knowings. When another career move was in the works for Raquel, she attributed this move as *"the Creator having plans for me".* She moved into administration to a school where the focus was cultural based education. She was enthusiastic about her work at this school and about the kinds of things that have happened:

> *My time at [this school] has probably been the most powerful learning time, learning time in the sense that all the things that I've ever been taught by these marvellous folks that I have worked with are coming to fruition in helping teachers be better at what they do. ...The academic cultural integration, the linguistic development of Cree and Ojibway all of its ground work, and people tell me over and over again when they see the [school] document that they have never seen anything like anywhere. And a piece of me begins to understand why I am doing what I am doing....One of the different things that's very powerful at [our school] is that we have...Pipe Carriers now and there's...Sundancers in that school and...Sweat Lodge keepers and so on.*

Although her school's mission statement reflects culturally relevant education for Aboriginal students, Raquel made it clear that not all teachers necessarily supported this vision. These teachers she felt needed to find a way to get on board with the school's goals by getting the appropriate professional development. She indicated too that if the teachers did not feel that they could support the school's goals that perhaps they ought to consider leaving the school. This is a tough situation to resolve as she felt that some of the teachers

did not believe that they were necessarily against the school curriculum. Raquel felt that it was easier to do 'circle work' with students than it was with teachers as she felt that this was where some of the issues could be resolved.

### *9.13 Barbara O t'atchanookewin*

Barbara is another woman who is near retirement and who has been in the field of education for over 25 years, most of it in Aboriginal education. The process of gaining confidence in our knowings has been a great challenge for her because coupled with this was her anger toward the mainstream system because of the oppression, forced assimilation into white society, and a strong Eurocentric focus in our curriculum. When she 'awoke' (see Barbara' O t'atchanookewin on chapter about Identity development) to the reality of Aboriginal people being duped into thinking that the only way of life worth living is that of 'white' society she began her process of integration of Aboriginal perspectives, issues, themes and models into her work as an educator. Since then Barbara has been instrumental in helping other educators development a commitment to education that is grounded in Aboriginal values and perspectives. She referred to one colleague whom she watched grow, she said *"He's had all of this way of expressing his Aboriginal heritage and watching it emerge was exciting!"*

Now Barbara is so adamant about teaching others about us, our ways and our values and our worth and she asserts that it is time that society is waking up to these realities too:

*Society is now realizing that the Aboriginal way of doing things and I don't mean just Turtle Island, I mean all over the world, internationally that way is being recognized and it is really a good way a balanced view. A balanced worldview that is much more gentler and inclusive of everyone and everything all the time, you know? ...You even hear Suzuki you know, David Suzuki, saying how that way of looking at the world is a way to be recognized you know. We should recognize it look at it because it is a very good way. So, of course within our own circle that we are still breaking ground. ....We are doing patchwork kinds of stuff but at least that patchwork will become a kind of quilt you know eventually (laughs). ...And the more I think about it, we, I don't like to say fight, but the more that we can express it in our own way the more that we can reach out. And I think that, of course, when we hear about....when we look at it in an urban centre like this (Winnipeg) where we have 72 maybe 80 thousand Aboriginal people living in here and...there are generations that are losing [our ways]. And it's not just going to be this generation or the maybe the next generation. You know we've always looked at the seventh generation I think that is who we have to look out for.*

In hearing/translating Barbara words I suggest that what Barbara is expressing her is thinking through what our values are, what do we have to offer/gift the world so that the seventh generation will benefit from an inclusive, gentle, balanced view of living. This is a similar refrain heard throughout this thesis.

Barbara was reflective about the challenges of this dual reality of understanding and living within mainstream parameters while asserting Aboriginal perspectives. It is as if she is sending out a plea to whoever will listen. *"It's almost if you get stuck there you have to keep working, you know there are going to be obstacles, the stereotyping, the racism everything is there but don't let those thing stop you from doing that work".*

Barbara related to her experiences with working for a government department where she was *"supposedly providing educational supports to Aboriginal communities".* Here, she recognized the tensions between working as

a 'bureaucrat' for a Eurocentric government office and as an Aboriginal person who is conscious and supportive of self-determination, worldviews and cultural expressions. Barbara was relating to her to work in rural Aboriginal communities:

> *Although I loved going out to the communities and working with what I thought would be my people, it was, you know, [I] was just delivering and restricting Aboriginal peoples from moving on. We always had to live with this certain bureaucratic mentality. .... That's when I went with Winnipeg one and I started out at a [high school]. I taught Native studies and geography and history. I loved it! I was just in...my niche! I loved history and I loved Native Studies but still we were working within [mainstream] parameters.*

Barbara had found her niche when she taught courses where she could focus on Aboriginal perspectives. Then she immersed herself in the current issues, politics and educational gatherings. This was about the time when the idea of establishing an urban advisory committee was born. This committee was responsible for assessing the educational needs and aspirations of the Aboriginal community. This was an opportunity for Barbara to get more involved and to get her students involved as well. Barbara related:

> *It was around about that time that idea the notion of race relations within the work place and Aboriginal awareness was present. They established a committee the Urban Educational Aboriginal Advisory Committee. And the first thing that they did was they used to hold youth and elder workshops. Well when they did that I used to gather as many Aboriginal students to attend the workshops. ...It was the youth themselves that expressed that they wanted a quality education that was meaningful to them: they wanted their culture, they wanted their language. They felt disconnected, already some of the students were second generation and more urban Aboriginal people. ...So it was themselves that brought up the whole notion of a culturally based and appropriate education. That was where the idea of the Children of the Earth High School...where that all stemmed from.*

Barbara talked about her own immersion into cultural teachings, languages, ceremonies and such, she said:

> *I was first introduced to 'formal' cultural ceremonies at age 5 when I attended a ceremony. The next formal ceremony was in 74 in Sioux Valley [Manitoba] when I attended a Sun Dance Ceremony. Culturally and spiritually speaking I was formally involved in one way or another since 1974. I'd go to a sweat lodge now and again, I'd listen to you now and again the teachings you know. ...I speak the language, I'm fluent and I'll talk whenever I meet someone but never in that institutional setting where I thought well if we are going to have a school that is culturally appropriate and culturally focussed of course fundamental to anything to any culture is language! We have to have language in there. Language must be mandatory! Aboriginal language, that is. and all of the culturally appropriate activities.*

Finally Barbara was at a place in her career where she could put into practice the culturally appropriate education she had been hearing and dreaming about; here she had an opportunity to do just what she thought needed to happen. She was an educator at an Aboriginal focussed school. She indicated that this proved to be a challenge to train as Aboriginal education teachers on-the-spot and to convince all teachers to accept the kind of curriculum development that needed to happen at the school. She said that working with the development of culturally appropriate materials along with invited traditional teachers and Elders that were becoming a part of the curriculum was an exciting time for her. She indicated that the children came from all backgrounds, the one common identity they held was that they were all Aboriginal, the differences were ages and grade levels, economic experiences, language and cultural knowledge and experiences, treaty status, Metis, Inuit; some students were

*"...hard core inner city...and third generation urban Aboriginal and who had no connection with their cultural roots or their cultural heritage".* In spite of the growing pains of getting the school off to a good grounding Barbara felt that the efforts were well worthwhile and being a part of that process of asserting Aboriginal education as a credible discipline has been both draining and exhilarating for her.

### *9.14 Ellen O t'atchanookewin*

Ellen is an Ojibway woman who has been dedicated to and involved in advancing different levels of Aboriginal education since she was in grade school. These challenges began when she was in grade school where she took up issues of stereotyping and racism in the classroom with her teachers. At the time she did not think of these as acts of racism, she simply thought of these acts as untruths because she knew she was 'Indian' and the portrayals were way off according to Ellen. In high school she participated and led some activities in a Native Students Club, then when she attended university she was clear about where she wanted to work. When she started her teaching career, she was involved in Aboriginal education immediately and that is the kind of work she has been doing since.

Ellen is very aware of the issues around resistance and lack of acceptance of Aboriginal education. She sees the importance of Aboriginal education in our schools today. She perceives it this way:

*Aboriginal education is for Aboriginal children. It's for Aboriginal educators. And it's because we need...to create that awareness and the actions to look at how people can become aware of Aboriginal peoples and the contributions in the past, in the present and that we are competent people as well and that we can contribute you know".*

Ellen expressed her concerns about the kinds of perceptions the Canadian public seem to hold about Aboriginal peoples and that is one of the reasons why we need to advance Aboriginal education, people need educating, she spoke emphatically when she made this statement:

*I know even with that whole mentality you know that Aboriginal people like they are sucking tax payers dry? You know?...Excuse me but Aboriginal people are taxpayers too! Like you know they [we] are always on welfare collecting this and that, that mentality! You know like my kid he has to pay taxes every time he goes to the store too? I pay taxes; I pay property and income tax and what not you know? It's just this assumption that Aboriginal people don't pay taxes and stuff like that you know that you have to create awareness for people. And as an Aboriginal teacher I don't actually like to call myself an Aboriginal teacher. I'm a teacher who <u>just happens</u> to be Aboriginal?"*

Ellen continued to talk about the kinds of pressures and stresses that are placed upon Aboriginal educators when they are in the field, open about their identity, their work and their desires for equity, fairness, self-determination and such truths. She was mindful of the fact that we need to become aware of what we can contribute and gain confidence in the gifts we have as Aboriginal people:

*Aboriginal educators...might not know what some of their strengths are? What some of the gifts they have?* (This is a similar theme to the point made earlier that sometimes people just have difficulty to articulate their knowings because they have been silenced though colonial processes, a decolonizing process needs to happen for our mental doors to open to confidence and possibilities.) *...Sometimes people develop...their gift[s]... later in life you know. That might...well...be why they don't want to be involved or its too much work to get involved you know? I think what also happens too, is for Aboriginal people, is that when you do work in the community or when you do work like for instance, in our circle, is that is*

*that as educators we have to work together. ....Even beyond the working environment what happens is, and I think this is where it is very different from mainstream and I don't want to generalize, but many of us ...have known each other from other communities, like our home communities and neighbouring ones, or from other connections through marriage or family or whatever because Manitoba is a very close knit and tight community. Like you could talk to somebody and you know their grandparent or their auntie or somebody. ...I think there are some very fine lines too where sometimes people might want to become involved but because of the history either politically, personally, professionally that might...create situations...[where] people might not want to be involved? I think...it's important to provide options for people where there could be situations where they could do this or that or how else can they see themselves contributing? So I think that takes a specific skill you know of certain individuals to do that to be able to, you know, when you are looking at contributions from educators to be able to do that so that to me is a real leader?*

As I 'read' from this statement, Ellen was contributing to the 'service' commitment that is part of our worldviews. She was reflecting on the different ways that people can 'get involved' in Aboriginal education without feeling exhausted. An example she gave is when we have gatherings there are different levels of involvement that doesn't necessarily require that all individuals come to meetings, they could just do some of the work that needs to be done:

*I think that there is also that assumption that educator's have to come to a meeting to be involved? And I think that there are other ways, like [Thomas] he is supporting the ATC and Aboriginal education by doing what he was able to do. And these [things] need to be validated and valued. I remember Thomas helping out at one conference, he made phone calls for us once a phone list was faxed to him. He did some follow up on contacts and got back to the chairperson of the committee.*

### *9.15 Charlotte O t'atchanookewin*

Charlotte did not articulate about how she drew from Aboriginal knowings and processes. Instead, she simply has been a strong advocate for fairness and

self-determination for Aboriginal peoples since she was a little girl. Her practice brought her in close contact with Aboriginal students as this was where she felt she could make the most impact. Unfortunately, she felt that most of the students in special education classes were Aboriginal so this was the space she thought she could make the most impact. What she did share with us however is that she has been involved in learning about Aboriginal traditions, ceremonies and teachings for the past 10 years in a more conscious way than in the past. She shared these words:

> *In the past 10 years, I have been involved in pipe ceremonies, sweats, give-aways, medicine picking, elder/traditional teachings, pow wows, naming ceremonies, feasts, women's teachings, Aboriginal traditional round dance, smudging, sharing circles, moon time ceremonies and tobacco teaching. In my early life to mid 20's I've done medicine teachings, duck hunting, collecting eggs in marshes, drying moose meat, making moose hide, beading, drying fish, putting tobacco down for the little people, berry picking.*

Charlotte is able to 'see' the value in these activities and when she is able she draws from the strengths of these and includes them in her teaching and research work.

### 9.16 Apischi O t'atchanookewina (Little Stories)

Little stories are as important as the big stories...so I share the little bit that was gifted by the following people: **Adrienne, Jacinta, and Marilyn.**

**Adrienne** said that she tries to live a life where she follows her culture and traditional beliefs. She felt that she was in a unique situation where she

could integrate and pursue her cultural life along with her job because she is a school administrator who is able to support these kinds of activities from her position. Adrienne has been involved in many Metis cultural activities such as square dancing, jigging and arts and crafts. She supports different groups who are attempting to follow their traditions. As an educator she is able to integrate and assert Aboriginal perspectives and she stated that she has done so for over 25 years.

**Jacinta** has supported and led an after school Pow Wow club, beading club, shared legends with her students and she does a lot of reading on the subject of Aboriginal perspectives, philosophies and gifts in education.

**Marilyn** spoke about her interest and commitment to embracing Aboriginal spirituality in education. She talked about wanting to take part in many ceremonies and teachings that will help her with spirituality. She is soon to retire from teaching and she now feels that she can participate in this area. Marilyn felt that her past teaching sites and experiences did not allow her that opportunity to assert Aboriginal perspectives in education as she was in the mainstream system for a long time and she was alone (as in only Aboriginal person) in many of the schools. Although she always supported and advocated for Aboriginal students this is as far as her involvement got and she feels that she has missed out on opportunities to get involved.

# CHAPTER 10

# WRAPPING THE CIRCLE AROUND THE HEART OF ABORIGINAL WISDOM

## 10.1 (Reflections and Conclusion)

*Our struggles against programs of enforced assimilation are testimony to our powers of cultural tenacity. That is worth celebrating (McMaster & Martin, 1999, p.11)*

*From the perspective of the Aboriginal people[s], the post-contact period is characterized as a time of great displacement and dislocation. Colonizing forces disrupted the fundamental relationships and ways of being in the world. However, time and experience have shown that Aboriginal people are survivors. Despite the intensity of the assimilative forces, their world view continues to provide meaning, direction and a sense of integrity to those who were given or who had made the choice to listen (The Common Curriculum, p.8).*

*Aboriginal Educators and Elders have envisioned an education for their children that strengthens and inspires by focusing on traditional wisdom. They have envisioned an education where the young people of today are helped in creating a peaceful balance within themselves using Aboriginal "laws" as a guide. The "laws" which govern life, are not laws in the literal and mechanistic sense. They are perspectives that can help young people to orient themselves positively as Aboriginal people while establishing or strengthening their personal identities. They are perspectives that enable Aboriginal people to live with integrity, regardless of the environment or circumstances in which they find themselves (The Common Curriculum, P.10).*

The words of the authors above are significant to this chapter because they speak to the processes that the participants have experienced and they speak of the future where the educators will lead the way for many Relatives: children, colleagues, brothers and sisters. It was the intent of this thesis to

document the career experiences of Aboriginal peoples within mainstream education and to demonstrate that those experiences needed to be shared and grounded in our distinct voices and visions.

The stories we just read/heard 'tell' us that these works were born out of the desire to rekindle, reconnect, remember, re-value, re-embrace and re-live Aboriginal perspectives, philosophies, values and ways. Our desire for self-determination was always constant, evidenced by the stories of the struggles and 'never giving up', but advocating for cultural relevance or for Aboriginal student equity. Now the reconnections to Aboriginal knowings and processes are becoming stronger across Aboriginal communities. Therefore, we need to carry out our work in ways that speak to the decolonizing process inclusive of self-determination and social justice that Smith, (2000) talks about. It is in the spirit of using our gifts as educators that we can work for the next seven generations (Brant Castellano, 200) with confidence that we have the wisdom available to us. We just need to look to the guidance of children, teachers, Elders, our knowings and processes, and the principles that do exist in mainstream education that are supportive of efforts to make education relevant.

What is also evident within these stories is the underlying theme that rekindling, reconnecting, and advancing/asserting Aboriginal core values and knowings cannot occur without also challenging the inequities (racism, oppression, stereotyping etc) that currently exist in our Canadian systems of education. Particularly, the kind of horrific treatments that Aboriginal peoples

endured in schools (residential schools, being a number one force of oppression) that forced many of our peoples to forsake our languages, cultures, heritages became a part of our identity. So, in this way if we are to look at our inner/outer environment and examine what sustains us as individuals and communities it become apparent that we have a duality/interface responsibility to both assert our ways while challenging the very structures and systems, which had/have at their core eurocentric ideologies that tend to ignore and/or undermine Aboriginal needs and aspirations.

I suggest that from listening/reading to the stories of the educators in this thesis their words can be used as guides for each of us to become active agents in changing educational processes (McLaren, 1994). By becoming 'active agents' Aboriginal educators and leaders can lead our children into the next seven generations in a way that the integrity of core Aboriginal values maintain their strength (Brant Castellano, 2000) while acknowledging that we do live in complex spaces with the mainstream world (Battiste, 1998, Couture, 2000).

These complex spaces or as I refered to them earlier in this thesis the 'truths' include the recognition that our stories with the mainstream world has included colonialism, oppression, and racism directed against our peoples, and our knowings and processes with the intent to "assimilate" us into mainstream society. It is becoming more and more clear from all accounts that "assimilation" was a 'failed' project as we Aboriginal peoples and our non-Aboriginal Relations resisted and struggles against the enforced domination and survived. Stories of

survival, hope, transformation, celebration, and cultural connections are evident in the words of the participants and in this way the stories have the potential to transform each of us and the way we engage to change educational structures. Furthermore, I contend that institutional changes that included multicultural, antiracism and equity approaches to education opened spaces for critiquing and challenging the status quo and welcoming social movements for a culturally relevant education system (Banks, 1988; Dei, 1996; Lee, 1985; Poonwassie, 1995 & RCAP, 1996).

To reiterate, the struggles against western dominance and the processes of reconnecting to Aboriginal knowings and processes were also apparent in the educators' stories. Through each of the themes it became evident that struggles included issues with stereotyping, racism, tokenism, lack of self-confidence with heritage languages and cultures, varying losses of languages and cultural ways, level of Aboriginal integration, definitions of Aboriginality, culture, and Aboriginal education, and finding space in the curriculum to do Aboriginal education, among other things. Yet, in spite of the above issues the participants' stories did reflect their desires to pursue Aboriginal education that moves in the direction of distinct self-determination in the Aboriginal rekindling of world views.

Changes are never easy and struggles can become paramount as the move toward rekindling and asserting Aboriginal knowings in educational processes occurs. At the centre of these changes, I submit are Aboriginal educators and our non-Aboriginal colleagues who dare to stand with us. The

tensions faced by Aboriginal professionals that Hampton (1993) discusses are futher supported by Couture (2000) who outlined the tensions that teachers of Aboriginal studies in universities inevitably experience. It is important, Couture asserts, that "the teacher must reconcile the demands of mainstream academic life, such as teaching, research, and publishing with the forthright claims of local community and regional groups" (p.164). I suggest that Aboriginal educators experience similar tensions in their work and this was evident in their stories.

> Teachers must perceive at the deepest levels the degree and the extent of the present trauma and dysfuntion [of our communities]. It is in light of this that traditional values and learning processes, including healing approaches, must be instilled. Thankfully, this process is now underway across the land; traditional ways can revitalize, and *are* revitalizing, the savaged and degraded soil of the native psyche (p.165).

In a way, what has transpired for the educators is also the realization that Aboriginal foundational concepts and values (Brant Castellano, 2000; Cajete, 1994; Couture, 2000), that sustain Aboriginal education, are what need to be brought to the attention of Aboriginal and mainstream educators who could then make changes for culturally relevant education. Therefore, I contend that stories of the research participants may provide a link to understanding the necessary philosophical perspectives, policies, programs, and professional development activities that may need to be developed in order to provide effective, relevant, and equitable career experiences.

Before I offer some of my closing thoughts in this reflections and discussion chapter, I share these closing comments by Bruce Elijah. These comments connect the circle of stories in a way that articulates the words that

the participants shared. It was as if Bruce's words were meant for all the participants' hearts/minds/souls/spirits as they continue in their journey as educators. Their paths into the field of education are now supported through many Elders, teachings, teachers, literature, and 'Aboriginal spaces' within educational institutions. Since Bruce was present in two of the sharing circles he was able to highlight what he heard and offered words for the participants to consider in their continuing journey. In this way, I extend his words of closing and wellness to all the participants and readers of this piece of work. Bruce first shared some closing invocations in his language, when he switched to the English language he said:

> *In doing the closing it is told to us that to see if we could bring our minds together and to see what are the things each of us said. And we recognize that the different things that we gave that we can all relate to parts of that, or some of it, and that it is not that far fetched. It's not something that you know that has no meaning to it.*
>
> *Every part of what you have shared has a meaning; there is a lot of questioning in there. And, I can only say that in the prophecy it states that there is going to come a time when our people are going to come together. And a lot of them are going to come through dreams and they're going to say I see myself and I'm doing something for our people and there's a meaning.*
>
> *You may say, I don't quite understand it but there is a meaning and then you may be driving, or walking, or you might be totally away from everything that's Native and you're gonna see something. You are going to see something that is going to take you back to a time that's going to make you think. Or you may be by yourself and you know suddenly your name is called out to you. That's your spirit helpers calling out to you and they will come to you <u>to wake us up</u>. I've seen people change you know, and they ask "Whaa oow, where is this going, how far is it going"?*

*The beauty of that is, you know, because not too long ago we couldn't have meetings like this, not too long ago. Not too long ago could you speak in your language because if you did you were punished. Not too long ago could we learn things about ceremonies and Pow Wows. If you used it you were imprisoned or something like that.*

*So there seems to be this waking up call type-of-thing that is happening right across the country! There's going to be people like yourselves, teachers, educators, you know who can identify things that you have gone through. And you put a lot of effort into this you know. You have invested a lot of time into this and to say I don't know why this thing is happening to me right now. It's because of what it is, is what you are. Whether you like it or not, you are the role models. And that's what the prophecy says you are the uncles, you are the aunties you have a purpose. That's what the children need and they are hungry for things like this. You don't have to sit down and explain to them that the guidelines and protocols and that because they can see them. Some of us said...that leaders aren't born, you know, they come into us they come into us you know from another life. They come prepared, you know, it's amazing heh? And I've seen that with little children...what knowledge they learned because of what was taught to them. They're already grown up and they're this small and they already know. And they say that in time that the teachers will be those little ones because their hearts are pure. You know they've gone through the hurts and the kinds of things we have gone through, it says that in time we will see that. And let me tell you that we have already seen that.*

*And it's right across this country that I'm seeing this in the cities, in the country, in the Native communities. I see where all the chaos is happening and I see the spirits attending to those little people. Wow,...Leadership is coming and we are going to move things, we have been hurt for so long because we didn't have the tools to do that. And the tool is that your mind and your heart, powerful things. I've seen the humanness of that the mind. So I encourage you to continue in your work, in your path, and I am honoured to be part of your stories, there is so much more that I can share with you but maybe that will be another time so I will stop now..Hoh hah.*

I say Ki nunaskamitin to my friend Bruce. I was honoured that he took time to join us in two of the sharing circles. As I read the words that Bruce shared with us, I was reminded of the kinds of responsibilities that educators in particular hold that speaks to the prophecy that this generation will lead the way

towards a process of healing and wellness. This desire to work with a process of healing and wellness (knowledge) emerged throughout the works and words of the educators whether or not they were cognizant that this was indeed occuring: a major responsibility that each of the participants shared in one way or another whether it was through their own personal or professional development that included Aboriginal knowings and processes. I contend that this responsibility comes through Aboriginal core values and principles of healing, caring, sharing, looking after our children, relationships, interconnections and honouring all of life.

Finally, it is with gratitude and confidence that I can say that there are also Aboriginal/Indigenous scholars who have taken up this responsibility of healing and wellness by making research culturally relevant. They suggested research processes and solutions that honour Indigenous ways of knowing (Bishop, 1998; Cole, 2000; Colorado, 1988; Hermes, 1998; Smith, 1999). Therfore, let me say that I was honoured to work with qualitative methodologies that advanced Aboriginal and Indigenous knowings and processes in this study to 'story' the Aboriginal Teachers' Circle members' experiences.

So now as I bring this thesis to a close, I ask you the reader to consider the words and the experiences of the participants. Consider the idea that whether or not they 'knew it' they did take leadership in developing themselves and in developing relevant Aboriginal education foundations that can guide us to model similar pursuits. One more time, I restate the 'truths' of the stories that

emerged in this thesis: The needs and aspirations of understanding and grounding Aboriginal education (teacher training, and personal and professional development) in decolonizing and core values of Aboriginal knowings and processes. The need to Understand and navigate the tensions that surfaced from participant stories. The need to challenging oppressive forces. The aspiration to develop positive identification and connections with Aboriginal heritage. Understanding the depth and complexity of an Aboriginal educator's work, and the value of children in the educational process. *Ekwa maka,* and so now I close this circle by giving thanks to the participants whose works are "worth celebrating" (McMasters & Martin P.11).

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