Providing a Lens for First Nations Youth to View Hope in Education

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ABSTRACT

First Nations youth have a strong sense of hope about their futures and how obtaining formal education can shape that future. Evidence suggests many First Nation students in Nova Scotia are not successful in their educational pursuits. The government of Nova Scotia reports that 27% of the Aboriginal population, between 25-64 years did not complete high school as compared to 19% of the general public. The issues of education and First Nations people are complex and have multi-layer aspects from historical, cultural and community perspectives. However, despite the vast amount of research regarding the educational needs of First Nations people, little is known about the First Nations youth perspectives on these important issues.

This qualitative inquiry focuses on how twenty Mi'kmaq First Nation high school students describe and represent their sense of hope in relation to their educational success and goals. I use critical theories based on the work of Freire, Aboriginal Scholars Battiste and Hampton, and Participatory Action Research Methodology as a framework for this inquiry. Methods included focus groups and informal conversations, individual interviews and photovoice.

The students created their definition of hope through focus group discussions and photography. Four main themes reveal their representation of hope and educational success. The students broadly identify that hope lives in several consistent places in their lives - their culture, community, family. These are fundamental to their perceptions of hope in general and need to be taken into consideration as the foundation for their success

in school. These Mi'kmaw youth provide community members, teachers and administrators, policy makers with their perspectives of the antecedents of hope.

RÉSUMÉ

Les jeunes venant des communautés autochtones ont un fort sens d'espoir environ leurs avenirs et comment une éducation formelle peut former cet avenir. La preuve suggère que beaucoup d'élèves des Premières Nations en Nouvelle-Écosse ne trouvent pas le succès qu'ils cherchent à l'école. Le gouvernement de la Nouvelle-Écosse indique que 27 pour cent de la population autochtone entre 25 et 64 ans n'ont pas réussi à terminer leurs études à l'école secondaire en comparaison avec un chiffre de 19 pour cent pour la population en général. D'ailleurs, le taux de chômage sur les réserves de la Nouvelle-Écosse est 24,6 pour cent en comparaison avec un taux de 9,1 pour cent pour la province. Les questions entourant les Premières Nations et l'éducation (l'instruction formelle) sont complexes. Elles sont composées et influencé par des facteurs et des perspectives historiques, culturelles et communautaires. Malgré une vaste quantité de recherche sur les Premières Nations au sujet de leurs besoins dans le champ d'éducation, il y avait jusqu'à date très peu de lumière sur les perspectives des jeunes Autochtones vivant dans les communautés des Premières Nations sur ces questions importantes.

Cette enquête qualitative se concentre sur vingt élèves de la Première Nation mi'kmaw à l'école secondaire en Nouvelle-Écosse. J'offre une analyse des perceptions de l'espoir dans ces jeunes dans le contexte de la réussite scolaire. J'utilise un modèle de théorie critique basé sur les travaux de Freire et des chercheurs autochtones Battiste and Hampton et ma méthodologie est celle de la recherche-action ("Participatory Action Research Methodology"). C'est un sommaire du cadre de mon enquête. Pour ma

recherche j'ai utilisé des groupes de discussion, des conversations informelles, des entrevues des individus et des "photo-voix".

Les élèves ont définit leur sens d'espoir à la suite des discussions en groupes et grace à la photographie. Quatre thèmes principaux sont révélés dans leur construction de l'espoir et la réussite scolaire. En général, les élèves indiquent que l'espoir demeure dans plusieurs lieux cohérents : la culture, la communauté et la famille. Ces éléments sont fondamentaux à leurs perceptions de l'espoir en général et ils doivent être pris en ligne de compte comme la fondation de leur réussite à l'école. Ces jeunes Mi'kmaq ont offert leurs perspectives sur les antécédents d'espoir aux membres de leurs communautés, aux professeurs et administrateurs à l'école, et aux décideurs politiques.

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CHAPTER 1

HOPE AND HARD WORK

Introduction

[Hope is] a combination of motivation and awareness of… opportunities. You can't have hope if there is no way. You have a goal – there is you, there's your goal, and between us there is a lot of things. Hope depends on how much you feel [that] you want it and how attainable it is (Jane, a Mi'kmaq student at Cobequid Educational Centre in Truro Nova Scotia, May 13, 2009)

In this chapter, I begin with Jane's (pseudonym*) reflection on hope. I chose this comment as a way of introducing Mi'kmaq* students' view of hope and education, and also to create a starting point as to how hope can be provided in educational endeavors. I believe it is important to give students the opportunity to share their perspectives regarding what is required for them to succeed.

This photo of a gate was taken by another student participant. Joyce provides an excellent example of how students can convey their perspectives in a creative manner.

Photo 1 'The Gate' (Joyce CEC, May 2009)

Joyce describes her photo this way:

*The term Mi'kmaq is used as noun and Mi'kmaw is used as an adjective.

It's a path, and there's one gate that's closed and one gate that's opened, and it means that you have to open both gates so you can go through the path…Your job can be on that side*, something could be blocking it, and you have to go and move it yourself so…Have hope that you are going to be able to pass through or get to your goals. You have to have hope that you are going to be able to open that upper gate to get to the other side*. (Joyce CEC, June 8, 2008)

Joyce commented on how her verbal and pictorial theme is consistent with other students' perspectives, using the gate as a metaphor to represent hope as a goal to work towards. Similar to the other students, Joyce believes that one must work hard, even though there will be things (like the barrier gate) that will get in the way. Joyce's narratives and pictures are thought-provoking and serve as a reminder that teachers need to use alternative methods, such as photo voice, to provide opportunities and individual research spaces for students to express themselves.

Guided by critical theory and the work of Indigenous scholars, and using the methods of focus groups and photo voice, I collected data during a three-week time period from May until June of 2009. The data collection process included working with twenty Mi'kmaq students from two high schools in four one-hour focus group sessions. The students spent two weeks capturing their images of hope, turning in over seventy photos for analysis. The final part of the data collection process involved 20-minute interviews with the students about their photos. I constructed themes from the data with the intention of presenting them to the stakeholders to encourage future dialogue that can be used to support Mi'kmaq students in Chignecto Regional School Board (CCRSB). By examining the issues presented by Indigenous scholars and the concept

of hope, my overall goal is to *create a framework for teachers of CCRSB to understand the challenges and struggles of Mi'kmaq students in their classroom.* My objectives are:

1. To explore the concepts of hope and its relevance to the field of education;
2. To investigate and understand students' voiced expressions of hope; and
3. To share the Mi'kmaq students' voices of hope with teachers of CCRSB in support of stronger teaching practices for our Mi'kmaw students of CCRSB.

Positioning Myself in the Context of the Research

I cautiously entered into this inquiry with some professional and personal considerations. I view my personal connectedness as a former student, teacher, administrator and friend with the two participating communities as an advantage, mostly because I was able to gain access to the communities. However, this ease of access created added pressure in that I was "putting myself out there" and potentially jeopardizing well-established and trusting relationships, which would have been counterproductive to my objective of working with and supporting these youth through their educational journeys. As part of my position as a Family of Schools Supervisor, I will continue to work with the students and people of these communities after this research is completed.

To some people in the band-operated school in Indian Brook, I could potentially represent white mainstream education and be viewed as another colonizer. While I am known in the community, this familiarity has come as the result of being an educator in both schools attended by the study's participants. Hence, the role of researcher is a new role that many people in these communities have not seen me in.

Nevertheless, and despite my familiarity with these communities and with the people, I am well aware that I am still an outsider. Villenas (1996) explains that researchers are sometimes placed in positions where they are both insiders and outsiders in a community, on different levels and at different times. As a former teacher in the study site schools, I am an insider. I know the relatives of the participants and the school-based First Nation Liaison Workers who assisted with the study. However, many of the students who participated in this project did not know that I went to school with their parents or that I knew the people they refer to in their personal stories.

Now, as a researcher who is using my previous personal school-related memories and my professional teaching experience to explore how these students conceptualize hope in terms of education, I am an outsider. This is the position I placed myself in, yet I still recognize the privilege of being able to hear the students' perspectives.

Reflecting on my personal identity, I was unsure as to how much to share with the students and others connected with the project. My early personal elementary school experiences as a classmate of Mi'kmaw students sensitized me more than I have acknowledged anywhere publicly or have had an opportunity to discuss. The memory of friends and classmates being treated differently by teachers and other non-Aboriginal students has stayed with me and I have always been drawn to want to shield them from these situations. The Mi'kmaw students sat at the front of the class and, as I recall, were disciplined more often and spoken to more abruptly than non-Aboriginal students.

These memories stayed with me, and my professional identities as a teacher and researcher were shaped by my desire to do something about how these students perceived school-based learning. I am sure my colleagues and the Mi'kmaw students wondered

why I was so compassionate and driven to reach out to find ways to engage them in learning, but I was frustrated by limitations in our curriculum. I saw and continue to see myself as having a deeper understanding of what these students experience as barriers to learning because of my personal and professional experiences, but the communities only know me as an educator so may not fully appreciate my insider role. In addition, my role as an academic has enhanced my insight into issues that are specific to Indigenous people.

I have worked as a teacher, administrator and consultant for 26 years with Chignecto Central Regional School Board (CCRSB), which is based in Truro, Nova Scotia. During these years, I have had many opportunities to observe Mi'kmaq students succeeding in their academic journeys and going on to become contributing members in their communities. However, I have also seen many Mi'kmaq students drop out of school for various reasons, such as adverse home situations, racism, peer pressure and just giving up on the school system or on their own abilities. This research is based on my lived experiences, both professionally and personally, over the past 44 years.

Focus of the Inquiry and Research Question

As I reflect on Jane's statement, I am impressed by her understanding of how success is achieved: that in order to succeed in the provincial school system, you have to work hard to achieve your goals. Jane and the other students participating in the research consistently comment that while hope is important, it alone will not lead to success, as without hard work, they would not progress or advance in their lives. In the next excerpt, Kathy, a focus group member from Indian Brook, explains why one needs more than hope to be successful:

> *If you just hope, if you always hope for something, it might not or it's not always going to come true. Sometimes it might, but for, like, a test, instead of just hoping, you should study…. You should take some actions towards achieving your goals rather then just hoping to achieve them* (Kathy HERH, May 14, 2009).

Kathy thus echoes Jane and Joyce in stating that to achieve, you need to do more than just hope.

In the field of First Nations (FN) Education, researchers are searching for new approaches to examine barriers to FN students' success in the provincial school system. Educational experts and scholars, such as Battiste (202), Lipka (2002), Hampton (1995) Alfred (1999) and Tompkins (2002), point to the colonizing curriculum, lack of cultural representation, and racism as factors that exist in provincial school systems. These marginalize FN students to the point where they no longer want to be a part of it. My goal, therefore, is to examine these issues from the viewpoint of students, as I believe it is important to have a student-based perspective to fully understand the scope of educational issues that impact them.

My objective is to provide useful information to the student stakeholders of Chignecto Central Regional School Board (CCRSB) and provide them with an opportunity to share their perspectives about what hope looks like to them. I then intend to share these emerging understandings with teachers and policy makers so they may better understand the concerns of their Mi'kmaq student body. I aim to accomplish this objective by providing a forum for this student population to talk about their perceptions of hope and education in a constructive and engaging way.

I present two experiences as a teacher of two former Mi'kmaw students, Jim and Wayne, to provide insights into how I became interested in the connections between hope, education and the personal well-being of Mi'kmaw students.

Jim's Story

In 1996, I taught a 17-year-old Grade 10 Mi'kmaq student by the name of Jim. Jim was struggling with a number of his courses. He had completed Junior High School through what was commonly referred to at that time as a 'social pass' (a social pass is when a student has not reached the academic outcomes to achieve a pass to the next grade level but is not retained because of their age). Jim stopped by my classroom one afternoon in early December to hand in his text book and to inform me that he was quitting. When I asked him why, he said he did not see any point of continuing in school because he was no good at it and he wasn't going to get his Grade 12 anyway. Jim also said that a family member told him he was wasting his time in school.

Wayne's Story

Wayne was a 19-year-old Grade 11 student taking a Grade 10 course from me in 2007. The course was Mi'kmaq Studies 10 (MKS 10). MKS 10 is one of three Social Studies courses high school students can take to help complete their Grade 12 certificate (all students in Nova Scotia must complete one of the following courses: Mi'kmaq Studies 10, African Nova Scotia Studies 11 or Canadian History). Wayne was doing very well in this course and showed, through his contributions to class discussions, that he was very proud of his culture. He was influential in sharing information and enhanced the learning of

other students in the class. On numerous occasions, Wayne was willing to share personal knowledge of his culture. For me, a non-native teacher teaching MKS 10, it was a great pleasure to have Wayne in this class. He would often stop by before class or stay after class to talk about 'sweats' he was preparing for or other cultural events that were going on in his community. These were clearly very important to him and he was well-versed on their cultural meaning to his history and community. This MKS 10 class was a first semester class that would end in January with a mandatory final examination. Wayne did not return to school after Christmas Break. I inquired about his situation and was told by one of his friends that Wayne had quit school and moved to Cape Breton. Wayne's friend said Wayne had not re-registered for school in Cape Breton.

Based upon my conversations with Jim and Wayne and their regular attendance in my class, I had assumed they were hoping to complete their high school diploma. The circumstances that led to Jim and Wayne dropping out of school appear to be related to giving up hope. I recognize that, in Wayne's case, it may have been more about my hopes for him than his own. These are just two stories; however, I believe there are a number of questions to consider in these and similar situations. As a teacher, I believe I have to do a better job of understanding what my students are thinking and hoping so I can support them in their educational journey.

Although my inquiry centers on the construct of hope, the concept means much more to me personally because of my connections with these students. I appreciate the privilege of exploring hope and how it is viewed both descriptively and visually by

students from their perspectives. Through a critical examination of the concept of hope as defined by Indigenous and non-indigenous scholars, combined with elements of the students' collective voices, I hope to contribute to the knowledge base to support FN students of CCRSB and possibly beyond. I used a Participatory Action Research (PAR) approach to engage students and invited them to share their perspectives. According to Wang (1999), PAR focuses on the direct actions of the participants to help the researcher achieve the research goal.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS:

In this inquiry I aim to answer the following research questions:

1. What do Mi'kmaq youth describe as their perception of hope in the context of learning?
2. What do Mi'kmaq youth photograph as their visual representations of hope that facilitate learning?
3. How might the phenomenon of hope play a role in facilitating learning for future well-being?

Two Schools

I present a description and picture of the two community provincial schools attended by the study's participating students. In these descriptions, I include a brief site history, population size, communities serviced by the school, the Mi'kmaw population, and respective programs. It is important to note that the students of the Millbrook community do not have the option of attending an M K school (on reserve, band-run school) unless they choose to provide their own transportation to attend that school in Indian Brook (a 45-minute commute from most of their homes). There are many complexities to school-based learning opportunities for these students. For this research,

I include only those students who attended the provincial schools with which I have some connection. The first school is the Cobequid Educational Centre in Truro, Nova Scotia; the second school is Hants East Rural High School (HERH) in Milford, Nova Scotia.

Cobequid Educational Centre

Cobequid Educational Centre is the largest high school in Nova Scotia, with a student population of 1700. Of these, there are 75 Mi'kmaw students. The school serves the town of Truro and its surrounding communities, including Millbrook First Nation. The total population served is roughly 20,000. The population of Truro is 14,000 and the population of Millbrook as reported by Statistics Canada (2006) as 703. Cobequid Educational Centre has a teaching staff of 90.

The school opened as a regional high school in 1970, as part of an amalgamation of a number of smaller schools in Truro and its surrounding area. Prior to the opening of Cobequid Educational Centre, Millbrook students attended Truro High School and Saint Mary's School, a private Catholic school serving Primary through Grade 11. Saint Mary's was run by a board of directors and staffed by the Sisters of Charity. My personal connection to Cobequid Educational Centre dates back to 1977-1980, when I attended as a high school student, and to 2006-2008, when I returned to the school to teach in the Social Studies Department.

Cobequid Educational Centre's follows the Nova Scotia Provincial schools Program for its curriculum. To help describe this school in more detail, I have included the following information from the school's web-page (http://www.cec.ccrsb.ca/about.htm):

> Cobequid Educational Centre's mission is to provide a broad-based, quality education for all students, and it is our belief that to do this, we need to provide diversity of experience as well as excellence in individual courses, programs and experiences. It is our aim to provide our students not just with the knowledge, skills and attitudes that are necessary to become life-long thinkers and learners, but also to develop them to their full potential both academically and as good citizens of our community (web page, http://www.cec.ccrsb.ca/about.htm).

Academically, Cobequid Educational Centre offers regular academic programming, advanced courses, an At-Risk Intervention program, School-to-Work program, Band, Music, Drama, Art, Physical Education, Business Education, Technology Education, Career and Life Management as well as a full International Baccalaureate program. The photo below is the front section of COBIQUID EDUCATIONAL CENTRE. The building was constructed in the early 1970s, in three phases.

Photo 2 Cobequid Educational Centre, Truro, Nova Scotia

Truro is a large town about one hour's drive from Halifax, which is the capital of Nova Scotia. The student population attending this school is the largest in the province and the majority of the students are bused in from a 60-kilometre radius around the school.

Hants East Rural High School

The second school Mi'kmaq students attended who were participants in this project is Hants East Rural High School. Hants East Rural High is also part of the Chignecto Central Regional School Board (CCRSB), based in Truro. Hants East Rural High School has a student population of roughly 850 students in Grades 9 through 12, and a teaching staff of 50. Hants East Rural High School was opened in 1957 as an

amalgamated school of several smaller local community schools. Originally, Hants East Rural High School was a Grade 7-12 school, but in the late 1990s, a Grade 6-8 middle school was opened in the same community. As a result, Hants East Rural High School became a 9-12 school that would service the area referred to as the 'corridor area' because of its geographical location in central Nova Scotia. The students that attend Hants East Rural High are from a number of rural communities and villages. Some of the larger communities serviced by Hants East Rural High include Milford (where the school is located), Shubenacadie, Enfield, Elmsdale, Lantz and the First Nations of Indian Brook.

Like Cobequid Educational Centre, Hants East Rural High School is a public high school serving the families of rural Nova Scotia. The school follows the Provincial schools Program for its curriculum and has a variety of programs to meet the needs of its diverse learners. My personal contact with Hants East Rural High dates back to 1990. From 1990 through 2000, I was a teacher in the Social Studies Department. The current number of Mi'kmaw students attending is roughly 70 and the majority of these students live in the First Nation community of Indian Brook. Hants East, as shown in the photo below (Photo 3), has had several upgrades and enlargements in its 53-year history. The school's mission statement is "Hants East Rural High School is a community of learners committed to developing responsible individuals in a supportive environment in which every person is treated with respect" (www.ccrsb.ca).

Photo 3 Hants East Rural High school, Enfield Nova Scotia (Public Domain, www.googleimages).

Historically the students of Indian brook would have attended the Reserve Day School prior to the construction and amalgamation of Hants East Rural High School. Also, up until the early 1970s, many Indian Brook students would have attended the Shubenacadie Residential School located in the Village of Shubenacadie. The students currently attending Hants East Rural High would be the children and grandchildren of former Residential School Students and would therefore be acutely aware of the history and impact these schools had on their families and communities. Shawn was the First Nations Liaison worker for Hants East Rural High. His mother (Geraldine Maloney) attended Shubenacadie Residential School. Geraldine was a friend and a fellow staff member at Hants East Rural High from 1990 to 2000. Geraldine, in a conversation, identified that many parents do not like to come to Parent-Teacher meetings at Hants East Rural High because of their past experiences at the Residential school (Personal Communication, June 1997). Geraldine passed away in 2005.

The school building burned to Hants East Rural High the ground in the 1970s. Interestingly, the route from Indian Brook reservation to passes within view of the Old Residential School site.

Photo 4. Shubenacadie Residential School Circa 1950 (Public Domain, www.googleimages)

Hants East Rural High and Cobequid Educational Center offer a Grade 9 to 12 Provincial school Curriculum to youth who live in their geographical area, which includes the First Nations communities of Millbrook and Indian Brook. The number of youth from these communities who attend these provincial schools is very small compared to First Nation students. From my own perspective, I had the unique opportunity of attending Cobequid Educational Centre as a student and then teaching Mi'kmaw students at this school, as well as teaching Mi'kmaw students at Hants East Rural High. Hence, I have a rich historical and contextual perspective to draw on when I embraced the opportunity to explore the interconnections between hope and education. I

was not sure I understood the depth of my own involvement with this question before I embarked on this journey.

Nevertheless, I do understand and appreciate this opportunity and privilege to explore the philosophical role hope plays in motivating FN students to embrace or at least endure the learning opportunities offered to them through the provincial school systems. I know it is worth exploring, and I attempt to do so using a scholarly approach that includes appropriate research methods, expert guidance from both students and academia, and my own experiential knowledge.

Significance of the Study

There is a cyclical process inherent in Mi'kmaq youths' sense of hope that impacts learning success, employment choices, and even lifelong outcomes. This cyclical process is discussed in the Romanow Report (2002), the fruit of a Royal Commission headed by Judge Roy Romanow on the future of Canada's health care system. The report suggests that Canadians who graduate from high school and who have a job are more likely to have better health. The authors of the Canadian Population Health Initiative (CIHI, 2005) report that one in three Canadians believe that social and economic conditions such as lower income and lower educational attainment influence the health status of Canadians. Certain groups such as Aboriginal* people and specifically First Nations people are more likely to have lower incomes (IHC, 2004).

Of Canadians 15 years and older, only 4% of First Nations people have a Bachelor degree compared to 16% of the general population. In addition, the First Nations unemployment rate is 22% compared to 7% for other Canadians (IHC, 2004). Comparatively, First Nations people in Nova Scotia have remarkably higher incidences

Some Mi'kmaq communities in Nova Scotia have responded to these alarming trends by being proactive and taking control over the educational needs of their youth.

In 1996, a tri-party agreement was finalized between the federal and provincial governments and nine Mi'kmaq FN communities in Nova Scotia, meaning they could offer their own community-based school. This agreement became known as *Mi'kmaq Kina'matnewey* (MK), the details of which I will discuss later in this chapter.

With the move towards self-government among many Canadian FN communities, there is a need to know if these educational initiatives are meeting the needs of a burgeoning population and present generation of youth. For some Mi'kmaq communities in Nova Scotia, the members had the choice of sending their children to MK schools or provincial schools. Elders and some Mi'kmaq scholars have advocated against returning to band-operated schools and are concerned that segregating youth from the mainstream may not prepare them for meeting life's challenges. This is just one of a number of issues faced by the community of Indian Brook, where some students attend the MK school and some students attend the provincial schools off-Reserve. Some other issues include transportation, student funding formulas and academic programming.

One issue that is prominent is the transferring of students back and forth between the two systems. Turner says in some situations this has led to a lack of community connectedness, which has and can contribute to adolescents becoming involved in antisocial behaviours (2005). Such behaviours can be detrimental to youth well-being and, according to Turner (2005), compete for time typically spent learning. What is perplexing to me, as a teacher, is that some students are successful in their academic journeys, stay and graduate from high school and go on to become contributing members

in their communities, while others drop out. In many of these situations, the students who drop out are academically capable and motivated to complete their high school diploma.

Success from my standpoint is retaining these students so they not only stay in school, but see themselves and their culture in the school context (including curriculum) and want to succeed and graduate. Achieving a high school diploma is the first step that has a large impact on the youth's culture, community and the well being of the Mi'kmaq people if they stay in school. In the recent report by the Health Council of Canada titled: *Understanding and Improving Aboriginal Maternal and Child Health in Canada* (August, 2011) education is singled out as a predominant factor requiring urgent attention.

Specifically, the report notes there is a lack of maternal and child health care workers but there are few eligible candidates, training and apprenticeship programs in the communities, university specialty programs and state " We need to support education at an earlier stages to have enough graduates for these post secondary programs" (Health Council of Canada, 2011, p.11). I believe hope plays a role for Mi'kmaq students during their educational journey and may act as a motivating factor; conversely, if hope is absent, the lack of it may act as barrier to their success as a contributing member to their community and beyond.

Tompkins (1998), together with some Indigenous authors such as Battiste (2005), Hampton (1995) and Lipka (2002), connect the links between marginalization and the lack of educational success of Aboriginal youth in mainstream educational systems. In a nutshell – marginalization can lead to hopelessness. At the core of marginalization of

First Nation students is the curriculum. Mainstream Eurocentric curricula have served to "turn off" First Nation learners and undermine Indigenous Knowledge (IK). Battiste (2002) argues that, in order to remedy this critical problem, a greater effort must be made to resolve the historical issues related to IK and mainstream education. Battiste further points out that there is still a conscious effort to undermine IK in the provincial school system:

> These strategies have caused Indigenous peoples to be viewed as backward and as passive recipients of European knowledge. Indigenous knowledge became invisible to Eurocentric knowledge, to its development theories, and to its global science. Consequently, Indigenous knowledge was not captured and stored in a systematic way by Eurocentric educational systems. Indeed, in some cases there has been a concerted push to erase it. The persistent and aggressive assimilation plan of the Canadian government and churches throughout the past century, the marginalization of Indigenous knowledge in educational institutions committed to Eurocentric knowledge, and the losses to Aboriginal languages and heritages through modernization and urbanization of Aboriginal people have all contributed to the diminished capacity of Indigenous knowledge, with the result that it is now in danger of becoming extinct (Battiste 2002, p.4)

The purpose of introducing Indigenous Knowledge to this discussion is to identify the link between theory, stakeholders' perspectives and curriculum content for First Nation students in Nova Scotia in the area of Indigenous Knowledge.

As mentioned previously, the Triparty Educational Agreement, known as the Mi'kmaq Kina'matnewey, was finalized by Canada, Nova Scotia and the Mi'kmaw First Nation (1996). It was meant to ensure IK was embedded in the educational experience of FN youth. This affirmed the province's acknowledgement of the Mi'kmaq jurisdiction for education on reserves in Nova Scotia. Of the thirteen Mi'kmaw communities, only nine have signed the Mi'kmaq education agreement. The communities that signed now control the education of their youth from primary through post secondary with the support and guidance of *Mi'kmaq Kina'matnewey*. The Mi'kmaw leaders wanted to have more control of the educational content for their youth, supplementing core education with cultural tradition and values.

In addition, they wanted to address discrimination issues they believe are part of the provincial school system. The notion of having community-based schools is in line with the philosophical work of indigenous scholars, such as Lipka (2002), Battiste (1998) and Hampton (1995). However, Battiste (2002) raises serious concerns about the curriculum of the *Mi'kmaq Kina'matnewey* schools because the Nova Scotia Department of Education still has control of what is being taught. There are discrepancies within and between the systems of what is in the best interest of the students.

The official Bill C-31, known as the Mi'kmaq Educational Act, was initiated in January 1991 and came to fruition in June, 1998. In many cases, members of the communities had the choice of sending their children to a community-based reserve school or to a provincial school. This issue of having a choice continues to divide many of the Mi'kmaq communities across Nova Scotia and demonstrates the ongoing conflict over what is in the best educational interest of the children.

Jennifer McCarthy (2001) completed a report on *Mi'kmaq Kina'matnewey* for the Institute on Governance entitled *Mi'kmaq Kina'matnewey: A Case Study in Aggregation.* This case study examined the *Mi'kmaq Kina'matnewey* history, governance structure and the outcomes of the aggregation process, highlighting the role of the citizen and ongoing supervision necessary to maintain and ensure the credibility of the educational initiative at the community level. The process by which *Mi'kmaq Kina'matnewey* takes its directives from the communities is explained in an interview with the Executive Director of *Mi'kmaq Kina'matnewey* (Marjorie Gould, Mi'kmaq). Gould describes a community-focused process, whereby all are given an opportunity to voice their concerns. However, there are key stakeholders in the process that are overlooked – namely, the students do not appear to play in this information sharing process as described by Gould.

This educational initiative is in many ways an attempt to decolonize the educational experiences for Mi'kmaq youth in Nova Scotia. I use the term *decolonizing* here to describe a process where Mi'kmaq students will be in a school system that teaches and supports academic curriculum and pedagogical practices that are not solely based in Eurocentric philosophies. A large part of this process involves exposing Mi'kmaw students to curriculum that has Indigenous Knowledge (IK) or First Nations ways of knowing and doing embedded in it. This has not been a priority for Nova Scotia Provincial Schools.

Based upon the collective works of Indigenous scholars included in this thesis, a decolonized education is in the best interest of Mi'kmaw youth. The idea behind *Mi'kmaq Kina'matnewey* is not new philosophically, but has drawn heavily upon *Indian Control of Indian Education* (ICIE) (1972). The ICIE is a foundation document

developed by The National Indian Brotherhood (1972) to serve as a basis for action in the area of First Nations education. The guiding principle for *Mi'kmaq Kina'matnewey* is stated in the following quotation taken from ICIE (1972):

> We must have the freedom to choose among many options and alternatives. Decisions on specific issues can be made only in the context of local control of education. We uphold the right of the Indian Bands to make these specific decisions and to exercise their full responsibility in providing the best possible education for our children (p. 4),

Gould (in McCarthy 2001) states that "the creation of *Mi'kmaq Kina'matnewey* and the transfer of jurisdiction to the communities was only 85 percent successful" (p. 9). This is based on the idea that all communities began the negotiation process, but only nine of thirteen communities signed the final agreement. In 2011, the original nine communities remained the same *Mi'kmaq Kina'matnewey* members.

Battiste (2002) identified the critical issue as being that *Mi'kmaq Kina'matnewey* is still subject to provincial curricula, and explained that cognitive imperialism exists because the provincial curricula remained as the foundation curricula for the *Mi'kmaq Kina'matnewey* schools. She defines cognitive imperialism as being a form of cognitive manipulation used to discredit other knowledge bases and values and seeks to validate one source of knowledge and empower it through public education (Battiste, 1986). While the issue of cognitive imperialism is not the focus of my research, Battiste does raise a number of questions around the *Mi'kmaq Kina'matnewey* initiative. For example: does the MK provide Mi'kmaq students with a culturally relevant education despite the use of a Provincially-based curriculum?

Background: First Nation Education in Canada

First Nation educational initiatives in the past thirty years have drawn primarily on the *Indian Control of Indian Education* document (ICIE, 1972). This report was developed to serve as a foundation document for future action in the area of education for First Nation students and is a common manifesto of philosophy, goals, principles and directions for Indian education. The ICIE clearly states the responsibilities of the stakeholders in Indian education (i.e., federal, local and provincial governments and agencies). Subsequent documents, such as the Assembly of First Nations report entitled *Tradition and Education, Towards a Vision of Our Futur*e (1989) and the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples entitled *Gathering Strength Volume 3(1996)*, identify specific problem areas and provide recommendations for reconciling Aboriginal educational concerns. One consistent theme emerging from all of the documents is the need for First Nation community-based and community-controlled educational systems.

The philosophical perspective in the ICIE document is that every adult is personally responsible for each child's learning and for all he/she needs to know in order to live a good life. This critical issue was raised at the Kativik School Board symposium in Kuujjuaq (2005). The conference was for educators and community members to discuss the problems interfering with school success. Two consistent themes that emerged were that many communities were experiencing similar problems and that the responsibility for the well-being of youth belongs to everyone.

Building on this shared responsibility for educating youth, Kavanaugh proposed that the route to improving the educational experiences of First Nations students is to promote the importance of parental involvement (2004). She identifies three key areas:

parents as the first educators in the home; parents as central partners with the school; and parents as advocates and key decision-makers for all children and youth. The notion of parental involvement is not new and is consistent with the ICIE document of 1972. Kavanaugh recognizes the challenge is to develop effective ways to increase parental involvement. Parental and family involvement are categorized into four areas: creating home environments that are conducive to learning; influencing children's positive attitudes to education; making schools more effective; and creating benefits for parents, families and communities (Kavanaugh, 2004).

Throughout the Kavanagh report, there are recommendations on how these four areas may be implemented. Problematic to the process of gaining greater parental involvement is creating a school environment that is welcoming to parents and community members. Many parents have had negative school experiences in their own formal education, which have had a profoundly negative impact on their own well-being and their perception of schools.

So far, I have discussed the over-riding philosophical perspectives of the *Mi'kmaq Kina'matnewey* versus the provincially-run schools and indigenous scholars' concerns relating to the influence of colonization perpetuated in the curriculum. This discussion also highlights the responsibility of community and parents and the challenges of integrating these concepts as a result of the historical perspective of First Nation people and education. I now include a discussion relating to the school experience of First Nation students.

The focus of the ICIE document (1972) shifts from discussion related to the parent and community responsibility to the school's role in education. The document

highlights three key points that will lead to happiness and satisfaction: pride in oneself, understanding one's fellowmen, and living in harmony with nature (ICIE, 1972, p. 1). The authors of the ICIE document propose that school programs should reflect the values that are compatible with First Nations people (ICIE, 1972, p. 2). Furthermore, all students should learn the history, customs and culture of this country's original inhabitants and first citizens: "We propose that educational authorities, especially those in provincial Departments of Education, should provide for this in the curricula and texts which are chosen for use in Canadian schools" (ICIE, 1972, p. 2).

It is noteworthy that this 33-year-old document is still considered relevant today. We have not effectively addressed the issues and recommendations in the ICIE, particularly in the areas of parental involvement and the provision of learning from aboriginal teachers. Many of the recommendations made in ICIE remain of concern today:

> The time has come for a radical change in Indian education. Our aim is to make education relevant to the philosophy and needs of the Indian people. We want education to give our children a strong sense of identity, with confidence in their personal worth and ability". (ICIE, 1972, p. 3)

The need to train and employ First Nation teachers to teach First Nations students was considered urgent when the ICIE report was written; how much more urgent has that need become today. The report noted that teachers with an understanding of Indian traditions, psychology, way of life and language create learning environments better suited to the habits and interests of Indian children (ICIE, 1972), as "the need for native

teachers is critical" (ICIE, 1972, p. 29). In keeping with the recommendations of this report, the Federal Government should provide opportunities in every part of the country for FN people to train as teachers.

Teacher education programs have been criticized for not focusing on such mechanisms as parental or community participation. As a result, teachers and administrators are uncertain about how to build bridges to the parents and the community in general (Kavanaugh, 2004). This is a consistent issue throughout the literature, dating back to ICIE (1972). Addressing this as one of the primary issues will be a step forward in reconciling the curriculum and communication problems that plague many First Nation communities. As someone involved in educating the Mi'kmaq youth, I believe that the system must work to cultivate young learners to consider a career as a teacher in their own communities. This will affect the long-term hope, learning and well-being of the youth. According to David Bell (2004), successful school community relationships do exist, as identified in *Sharing Our Success: Ten Case studies in Aboriginal Schooling*.

Bell (2004) provides an overview of the components necessary for successful educational practices for schools that serve First Nations communities. Bell et al. (2004) identify six "critical issues" that must be addressed if Aboriginal students are to be successful: governance, funding, Aboriginal language and literacy, teacher supply, transitions, and performance measurement. While all of these issues are important in the context of First Nation education, the issue of teacher supply continues to be a critical problem even in successful schools. First Nation communities have difficulty recruiting and retaining qualified and experienced staff. The recruitment and retention of FN

teachers has also been a problem for the two schools in this study as well as for their feeder schools.

The recommendations that emerge in this document reflect the community, schools current needs, and include:

- Encouraging open-door policies to make families feel welcome, recognizing that staff may need to "go the extra mile" in reaching out to those whose personal educational experience has been negative.
- Fostering strong community ownership of and partnerships in school programs.
- Introducing, in universities and teacher education programs, increased recognition of Aboriginal languages, greater access to first language specialties, and training programs designed to assist fluent speakers without teaching credentials.
- Introducing teacher education programs that: a) require a cross-cultural education component in Aboriginal education or offer a specialization in this area; b) offer programs and student-teacher placements in Aboriginal communities; and c) provide support and opportunities for Aboriginals working in support roles in the schools to acquire teaching credentials in incremental stages. (Bell 2004, p. 324-325)

Conceptually, these recommendations resonate with me as both an educator and as someone who has personally witnessed educational alienation of Mi'kmaw youth; however, in the case of the *Mi'kmaq Kina'matnewey* and Nova Scotia School Boards, there is little operationalization of these objectives, which may explain some of the

worrisome national and provincial statistical trends regarding educational success rates of First Nation students.

In addition to Bell's recommendations I propose that it is essential for teachers who practice in communities that serve Mi'kmaw youth that they understand the cultural complexities of the M'kmaw youth. Understanding the cultural values of one's students can increase a teacher's ability to support one's students in ways that will support self-efficacy relating to educational achievements. This challenge is not considered a priority in teacher education training. In Paley's book *White Teacher* (1979) she talks about the challenge of teachers understanding of students and states:

> The challenge in teaching is to find a way of communicating to each child the idea that his or her special quality is understood, is valued, and can be talked about. It is not easy, because we are influenced by the fears and prejudices, apprehensions and expectations, which have become a carefully hidden part of every one of us (Paley 1979, p. xvi).

In many cases teachers project their own values and expectations on their students and these are not necessarily culturally relevant for Mi'kmaq youth. I discuss the connection of teacher training and the relationship between students and their teachers further in Chapter 5.

Summary

In this introductory chapter, I provide some relevant contextual background related to the policies and history of First Nation education in Nova Scotia. I also discussed issues that indigenous scholars and well-established reports identified as being necessary for decolonizing the curriculum. As well, I introduced student voices on the

concept of hope and present the construct of hope as a viable focal point from which to explore how to retain and engage Mi'kmaq students in high school so they can achieve the same graduation rates as non Aboriginal students. Hope seems to be a common discourse that should be considered from a pedagogical perspective for teachers of First Nation Students.

In Chapter 2, I present an overview of the relevant theoretical perspectives of hope and how it relates to education. I also situate the concept of hope within a critical theory framework and identify the commonly discussed antecedents of hope for First Nations Youth. In Chapter 3, I discuss the use of Participatory Action Research in this project and I give a rationale for the chosen methodology and methods. I also highlight student voice and draw upon participant photos to emphasise the impact it can have on this type of research.

In Chapter 4, I present the data that was collected during this project and discuss how I analyze the data. Additionally, I present the themes that emerged from the student focus groups and investigate how student photos illustrate a visual representation of hope. In the fifth and final chapter, I provide a critical self-reflection about my role as the researcher, responsibilities, and the gaps in the data. I conclude Chapter 5 with six recommendations for the school communities and also discuss the implications and directions for further research with students and focus on the importance of providing them with opportunities to share their stories.

CHAPTER 2

Theoretical Framework for Defining Hope:

Schools as Beacons of Hope for First Nations Youth

Introduction

In this chapter, I examine the definition of hope and why it seems relevant from a First Nations perspective with regards to marginalization of Mi'kmaq students. To explore the role of student hope from a theoretical standpoint, I discuss relevant perspectives that can provide an understanding within the context of formal secondary education. I include a literature review on the concept of hope in general and for First Nations people in particular. Then I discuss the importance of including youth perspectives in educational success and the role of educators as facilitators in enabling contexts to ensure student success.

To begin this discussion of hope, I focus mainly on the published works of the Indigenous scholars Battiste (2005), Hampton (1995), Lipka (2002). I also use the work of de Sales Turner (2005), Snyder (2000), Lopez (2000) and Tompkins (2002) to explore the concept of hope and its relationship to education. These scholars write extensively about issues that resonate with my own teaching experiences. Moreover, the student participants identify similar themes in their pictures and discussions as the scholars present. These themes include hope in terms of their future and hope as an important concept in relation to education.

I also situate the concept of hope within a Freirian theoretical framework. I rely on the works of theorists Freire (1992) and Battiste (2002) to show how mainstream public education further perpetuates the marginalization of Mi'kmaws students. I begin by defining terms Indigenous First Nation's scholars use that are relevant to my exploration of hope.

Defining Hope

I draw attention to the definition of *hope*, *self-efficacy* and *student voice*, as these concepts are consistently used by the scholars I rely on to frame this research. By providing these definitions, I am emphasizing the importance of these terms to this research and the importance of these terms as found in the literature on this subject. The students in their discussions start to link hope and self efficacy dependent concepts. The students identify hope as important however, one has to have a sense of self efficacy if one is going to achieve. For me this link became an important part of the themes identified in the research, *hope is hard work.* I define voice here to emphasize its significance to this research. Providing a space for Mi'kmaq student voice to be heard is a main objective of this research.

***Hope*:** Snyder (2000) conceptualizes hope as a process that is goal-oriented and involves a generation of multiple routes toward a chosen goal and maintenance of motivational levels that need attending to make progress along these routes.

Self-Efficacy: I use Bandura's (2000) concept of self efficacy, which he identifies as a person's attitudes, abilities and cognitive skills or 'self-system'. This system plays a major role in how we perceive situations and respond to situations. Like hope, self-efficacy is an essential part of self-perception.

Student Voice: Rogers (2005) describes student voice as the active opportunity for students to express their opinions and make decisions regarding the planning, implementation and evaluation of their learning experiences.

It is on these definitions that I base my central argument for this inquiry. I believe that teachers have an obligation to promote and foster hope in their students; however, to fulfill this obligation, teachers must understand how students conceptualize hope. Once teachers know what students are hoping for, they may be in a position to support their students to define and maintain their goals. Teachers need to guide their students and support their learning towards developing perceptions of self-efficacy; they should also be their advocates. In the next sections, I frame the role of hope in education and, with the help of twenty Mi'kmaq students, explore how we can assist students to maintain, sustain and inspire hope and overcome their marginalization.

Defining Hope in Education

Battiste (2002), Hampton, (1995) Lipka, (2002) and Tompkins (2002) link the lack of educational success of First Nations youth in mainstream educational systems to issues of marginalization. Some of these issues focus on Eurocentric concepts in all curricula areas, lack of representation of First Nation's culture in programming, language barriers, and lack of positive reinforcement from other socializing agents within their communities. One can assume that this continuing colonization can contribute to the marginalization of Mi'kmaq students and thus could result in students "giving up hope" that they have the skills and abilities (self-efficacy) to successfully meet the expectations of the public education system. To address what "giving up hope" really means, I want to understand what hope means from a Mi'kmaq student's perspective.

Mi'kmaq Students Defining Hope

The student participants define hope as a very important concept that needs to be understood in the context of their lives and communities. The following excerpts are examples of the collective working definitions that the student participants developed in the two focus group sessions.

The Hants East Rural High School students group definition of hope:

> *Hope is a belief that positive things will happen in life. Hope is something that comes out in many ways on a daily bases. To have hope is to be motivated to achieve in whatever it is you have set as your goal. Hope is important to have but you need more than just hope to have good things happen, you need to take action*. (HERH students, May 2009)

The Cobequid Educational Centre School students group definition of hope:

> *Hope is a belief that good things will happen in life. It is having a dream or a goal that could be life changing. Hope is a combination of motivation and awareness of opportunity. Hope depends on how much you feel like you want it and how hard you are willing to work. Hope is something you have for yourself as well as for family and friends.* (CEC students, May 2009)

It is noteworthy that, in comparing the transcripts, I found many similarities in the way the groups described hope. They used common phrases and terms such as:

- the belief that positive things will happen;
- motivation;
- the need to take action;
- having a dream;

- awareness of opportunity; and
- the willingness to work hard.

These word choices are also found in the scholarly works of authors in the fields of Philosophy, Psychology and Theology. Turner (2005), a nurse scholar in Australia, studied the link between the perceptions of hope and feelings of well-being in a group of Australian youth, stating that "[h]ope is central to our very humanness, and is important in our lives" (Turner, 2005, p. 513). She sees that young peoples' perception of their own well-being is strongly linked to their community. This sense of community is evident in the Mi'kmaq youths' definitions, especially when they identify their friends and family as agents of hope. Turner criticizes the lack of studies in the area of hope from the perspective of young people. She emphasizes the importance of having hope and how it impacts all aspects of our lives. She suggests that hope is "an essential component of human development that is possible through the development of trust" (Turner, 2005, p. 509).

Turner (2005) further suggests that, while the ways in which people conceptualize hope may be different, having hope in one's life will give value to one's life. It is a necessary and fundamental component that should be present in community, home and school. This point resonates with me when I reflect on the transcripts of the focus groups. In the following statement, Mary conveys the power of hope in her life:

> *Hope is life-changing, life-saving... for people that are on drugs and stuff… having hope can actually change a person's life.* (Mary, CEC Focus Group, June 1, 2009)

Like Turner (2005), Mary identifies having hope as a significant belief and attitude that can inspire change or provide value to one's life.

The participants in this inquiry feel an obligation to provide a sense of hope for others in their lives and hope occupies a space in the consciousness of these youth. It is important to consider the impact of hope on students and their attitudes toward achieving their academic endeavors. Similar to Turner's ideas about hope, the students stated that there are significant pre-existing conditions and life situations that play a role in keeping hope alive for them. Before reviewing how the students represent hope through photography, I situate hope and education within Freirian critical theory.

Theoretical Framework

Critical Theory and Hope

I use Mi'kmaq critical researcher Battiste to help make the important connection between hope and education from a First Nation perspective. The two prominent critical theorists I rely most on to underscore my own conceptualization of these connections are Paulo Freire (1992), who wrote *Pedagogy of Hope*, and C.R. Snyder (2000), who edited *Handbook of Hope; Theory, Measures, and Applications.* Freire (1992) describes hope as an "ontological need", pointing out that "the role of the progressive educator, through a serious of correct political analysis, is to unveil opportunities for hope, no matter what the obstacles may be" (p. 9). Further, social justice and an educational system must encourage hope, which must be grounded firmly in a pedagogical practice and praxis or an "education in hope" (p. 9). Although Freire's work is based on studies performed in Latin America, it has particular theoretical and practical application for Mi'kmaw's education.

In his earlier work, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed,* Freire (1972) discusses how education is used by the dominant group of a society as a means of indoctrinating the 'under classes' to passively accept or adapt to a world of oppression. The use of a Freirian conceptual framework helps me to consider how education can actually be a helpful context to reverse the marginalization of First Nation's people. The education system can be a leader and model of how not to accept the world of oppression by decolonizing the system. Freire's work connects with Battiste (2003), who writes about decolonizing the educational institutions of Canada. Battiste's use of the word "colonizing" refers to an educational system that indoctrinates Mi'kmaw students into accepting western educational ways of knowing as being better or more important than First Nations ways of understanding and knowing. By engaging in this research, I am beginning to understand the colonizing impacts of the public school system to which Battiste refers, which inspires me to engage in the process of decolonizing the system.

The de-colonizing of public schools is an important step to improving the education educational experiences of First Nation students. Another important aspect of decolonization process is the decolonization of teachers' attitudes. While the focus of this enquiry is *student perceptions of hope* it is important to draw attention to the issue of school culture and teacher attitudes. McIntosh (1988) discusses the issue of *White Privilege* in the article *Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack.* The articles focus on unearned privileges enjoyed by whites and how these privileges can impact no-whites negatively. McIntosh (1988) also argues that by having these unearned *skin privileges* we can take on the role of the oppressor. As part of the decolonizing process it is

important that teachers be aware of how they may be perceived by their students culturally.

McIntosh (1998) states: *My schooling gave me no training in seeing myself as an oppressor, as an unfairly advantaged person or as a participant in a damaged culture* (p.1). Often First Nation students give up hope as a result of this *damaged culture* identified by McIntosh. It is not part of this enquiry however I believe that structural changes must take place if schools are going to be able to build a *culture of hope.* In building this culture of hope it would be valuable if teacher training programs included a mandatory cultural training component.

Having hope and hopeful thoughts are commonly used constructs in research exploring young children's attitudes in confronting unimaginable conditions (Snyder, 2000). Snyder cites the cases of Ryan White (a young boy with AIDs) and Anne Frank as young people that continued to have hopeful thoughts in spite of facing health and social discrimination issues (Snyder, 2000). While these cases are exceptional, the question that I should ask is what gave these two youth the strength and resilience to continue to have hope in spite of their difficult situations? I suggest there are antecedent conditions that I should consider if I am to foster hope in youth.

As indicated in First Nation literature, the education of their youth should take place in an environment that integrates Native culture, language and curriculum (Lomawaima, 1999). First Nation scholars are consistent in their message that cultural survival of First Nation communities is dependent on the role the youth play; providing students with education reflective of their culture is a logical assumption. Scholars describe this survival and hopeful vision as a future that is decolonized from the

mainstream, and that such 'decolonizing' must include schooling. Battiste argues that Aboriginal students must be given a curriculum that reflects their cultural being if the colonizing process is to be stopped (Battiste, 2002).

Snyder (2000) identifies "hopeful thought" as a potential inherent in all humans and considers it integral to education. Snyder explains that hope is a type of goal-directed thinking in which the protagonists perceive themselves as capable of producing routes to the desired goals, along with the motivation to initiate and sustain usage of those routes. The concept of hope he and his colleagues present is within all young people and certainly evident in the student's definitions. In their in-depth analysis, they propose that hope must be attended to and encouraged throughout a person's schooling experience, a belief that aligns with my own perceptions of hope and education.

Having hope affects one's behaviour and can help explain a person's action. Hope is connected with the concept of *human agency*. Bandura's (2000) work in the field of Social Cognitive Theory showed that hope can affect a person's behaviour and the goals. Consistent again with the students' definitions, Bandura defines a person with hope as a person who has a vision of what he/she wants for their future. If a person has a hopeful state of mind, that person may try to find enabling pathways to achieve their goals. People with hope desire good things and believe that goals are attainable. Hope is innate in all humans but needs fostering and encouragement or it can be lost to the individual. The twenty Mi'kmaq students identify agents of hope in their definitions, descriptions and photography and highlight how this encouragement can exist in their communities and schools.

Review of the Relevant Literature

I review the current literature on four relevant areas that are considered agents of hope in a person's life. Then I discuss the links between the concepts of hope, as previously described, with some examples for each social agent identified by the students. Building on the work of Turner (2005), the four relevant social agents of hope I explore are culture, community, family and school. These social agents I refer to as the 'antecedents of hope.'

In Mi'kmaq culture the symbol of the circle has spiritual meaning and is seen as an essential part of their culture. In referring to culture, I reference Bates and Plogs' (1990) definition of culture, which is "the system of shared beliefs, values, customs, behaviours and artifacts that the members of society use to cope with their world and with one another, and that are transmitted from generation to generation through learning" (p. 7).

In the Mi'kmaq culture, the medicine wheel is a commonly identified artifact that encompasses the symbolic meaning of the circle, as seen in this photo by Mary:

Photo 5. Symbols of Culture

Antecedents of Hope

Culture

Culture is a commonly discussed thematic thread in the literature that First Nations and non-First Nations authors stress as being the possible key to educational success for youth. Lopez sees a connection between the concepts of hope and culture and suggests that hope is an ever-present aspect of the human condition that has been demonstrated across time and cultures (Lopez, in edited collection *Handbook of Hope: Theory, measures, and application* Snyder, 2000). 'The amazing success at maintaining cultural integrity and establishing a cultural legacy in the face of atrocious obstacles also may be fuelled by the desire to maintain their connection to the land' (Lopez, in Snyder, p. 237). The notion of hope being a life-sustaining force is evident in the following passage by Bear Heart of Muskogee Creek Nation:

> Live hopefully. It does not matter what happens, what your circumstances are, you have something to connect with when you yourself cannot solve a problem – lie down on Mother Earth, she'll caress you. She still gives you energy, and still says, 'Look up to the creator. Talk to Her, pour your heart out. The answer will come' (Bear Heart, 1997, in Snyder, p. 237).

To further accentuate the role culture and hope may play. I include the next photo Joyce took of the Pow Wow grounds of her community of Millbrook. The image is framed through her own hands, forming a heart. Joyce explained that this photo of the Pow Wow grounds shows the connection of the love she has for her culture and that this love and connection is a source of hope for her future.

Photo 6. 'The Pow Wow Grounds'

Joyce describes her photo the Pow Wow Grounds in the following way:

> *My hand lifting a heart around the Pow Wow in the center, like when they drum and stuff. Pow Wow grounds….I took it because I hope I'll be able to always love my culture and always know who I am, the heart represents my love for it and the passion that I want to keep [in] striving to learn my culture.* (Joyce, CEC, May 2009)

Community

Alfred (1999), of the Mohawk Nation, is a strong advocate for restructuring Native communities by reforming government structures and reviving traditional values. This process must include an emphasis on the education of youth. Alfred (1999) believes that Native communities must focus on creating a new generation of leaders grounded in traditional values if the damage done by white society is to be undone; he also states that hope for the future of native communities will depend on the development of those communities' youth. A good example of what Alfred (1999) describes is Jarvis Googoo

of Waycobah First Nation. Googoo is a Senior Policy Analyst at Aboriginal Affairs and graduate of Dalhousie University Law School (2008). In an article in the Chronicle Herald (2011), he attributes his success and education to his personal connectedness to his community and culture: "It's a combination of my legal training, an understanding of my culture, language and where I come from that shape my work" (Jarvis Googoo, June 11, 2011).

Googoo's comment indicates that success for First Nations people may be grounded in strong cultural and community ties Collier (1993), a non-Native, puts forward a similar notion about aboriginal youth, projecting them as representing the future hopes of their communities. She also proposes that the community must pay attention to the needs of their youth if the community is to have a future.

The significance of community and the impact this can have on young people's outlook on life became apparent in my discussions with the student participants. In the next examples, Chris, Brian, Faith and Jane respond to the following question: "If you had the opportunity to talk to people in positions of power to make decisions and make changes, what sort of things or suggestions would you make that would promote hope among young people in your community?"

***Chris**: More money for sports.*

***Brian**: In Indianbrook, we need a place where kids can hang out and get away from drugs.*

***Faith**: Well, if you were going to try to promote hope in minority communities, that would be quite a struggle because of their past oppressions and bad experiences, because that… has diminished their*

self-esteem and self -concept as a race or ethnicity or religion or whatever, and the government seeks to rectify that by just giving money or... certain privileges, but it is not always about money. It's about pride and there's got to be some kind of motivation there, because there are people who live on the reserve who get that cash incentive to go to school, but that doesn't necessarily mean they are happy. It's just that minorities have been oppressed for so long that they just feel that they can't do better, so I think that you should pay special attention to those communities because they seem kind of degenerate at the moment and they don't really take pride in their communities.

***Jane**: To promote hope, I think they need to be more aware of the successful people who came from the places they came from, because when you only see... when you are where you are and you only see the people who stayed there and didn't get to go anywhere, that's all you have to go on. But there [are] so many examples of people who became lawyers and doctors and extremely successful but they just don't know about because they gained their success and take off to go somewhere where they can... flaunt it, I guess. They forget to come back to show people here what they can do. They don't necessarily have to come back. If we could take advantage of ther success and have... some sort of presentation of these people that the youth here can look up to, I think that is going to open their eyes.*

The students have insight into those areas that can inspire them to hope and to maintain hope. They also know all too well about conditions that take away their hope. A lack of community connectedness can contribute to adolescents becoming involved in antisocial behaviours (Turner, 2005). These behaviours can be detrimental to youth well-being, and likely compete for time typically spent learning. The four students' comments and the Jarvis Goo Goo example provide a link between hope and community connectedness.

These comments provide a window for the stakeholders of those communities to understand what the future leaders of the same communities see as ways to improve their communities. The students understand the needs of their communities and feel a connection to their communities, with family emerging as a common thread throughout the literature and discussion of hope.

Family

The significance of family in fostering hopeful thinking in children is cited by Snyder and Feldman (2000) in that if children live in homes with turmoil and uncertainty, there will be a greater chance they will live with or develop low hope thinking. Snyder (2000) also stresses the important role of the family in encouraging children to develop goals and think about the future. The document *Indian Control of Indian Education* (1972) draws our attention to the connection between parental support and educational goals:

> Indian parents must have control of education with the responsibility of setting goals. What we want for our children can be summarized very

> briefly: to reinforce their identity [and] to provide the training necessary for making a good living in modern society. (p. 30)

These ideas are highlighted in the literature as well. Hampton (1995) cites Bradley (1980) regarding the expectations that Indian parents have for their children to gain during their educational experience: "Most Indian parents want their children to be taught those things needed for success in both the white and the Native worlds" (Hampton 1995, in Battiste & Barman, p. 7). Balancing mainstream education and First Nations content makes for a challenging and interesting educational fabric to weave for the schools of both communities.

Throughout the data collection process, I noted that the students identify members of their families as being sources of strength and beacons of hope for them. In some cases, they identify family members as targets for their hopes due to tough life situations they were confronting and/or overcame. In these following exchanges Doris, Mary and Susan comment on their perspectives of family and hope:

> ***Doris****: Dad is... my role model because he is... a native alcohol/drug counselor... I have never tried alcohol and drugs and I hopefully never plan to try them.*
>
> ***Mary****: I think I have more hope for my family than I really do... in general, 'cause... with my mom and stuff, she went through this really tragic accident [that] left her face scarred and fingers and stuff. I had to live with her for eight years and tell her she looked beautiful and stuff like that. And finally... after I [had] been helping her out [and] helping my*

> *little sister out and stuff like that, she finally had the confidence to leave and go out and do stuff. It's really hard. I mean, it wasn't the easiest thing. But I had hope for her.... Even if she still has a lot of problems and stuff, I think she is doing a lot better than she did when it first happened....*
>
> ***Susan**: My mom, she was sick before, like mentally sick, where she couldn't take care of herself. She did things that I guess would not look after herself and then none of my brothers would look after her and then I would go visit her and look after her. If you are going to get better, you are going to be able to move out on your own again and you want to be... happy. Now she is better and she's happy and she lives by herself, so I feel better and she feels better.*

The student participants clearly view themselves as sources of hope for others and, through their positive behaviours, see themselves overcoming adversity. This theme of hoping for others is also evident in the school situation.

School

There has been a clear and consistent theme among First Nation scholars that hope for First Nation youth lies in a school system that is strongly rooted in their own culture and values. Hopeful thought must exist in schools for youth to want to succeed. For aboriginal youth, this may be better achieved in an educational setting that is grounded in their traditional cultures and values. Many First Nation students drop out of school because they feel a need to strengthen their Indian identity (Chrisjohn, Townson, Peters, in Enos, 2001) and the school system may not acknowledge this identity and infuse hope in the mainstream curriculum expectations.

Alan Corbiere (2000) of M'Chigeeng First Nation effectively argues the merits of a culturally- and linguistically-based education for First Nation youth. In his article *Reconciling Epistemological Orientations: Toward a Wholistic Nishnaabe (Ojibwe/Odawa/Potawatomi) Education,* Corbiere (2000) draws upon other Scholars such as Hampton to explain how a Native epistemological-oriented discourse can foster hope and positive self-esteem for Native youth. Corbiere (2000) stresses the need for a holistic approach to education for First Nation students, as "fostering a positive self-image and forming a healthy identity are inherent in holistic education" (p. 2).

One way to foster a positive self-image and hope among Mi'kmaw students is for them to see Mi'kmaw role models in their classrooms. In the next section, I link the concept of hope to education and introduce the issue of the lack of Mi'kmaq teachers in provinsial school classrooms of Nova Scotia. I also discuss the work of Eber Hampton (1995) and Joanne Tompkins (2002) to emphasize the significance of recognizing the negative impact colonial schooling has had on First Nation youth.

The Importance of Hope in Education

To introduce the important connection between hope and education, I discuss Snyder's assumption that teachers play a critical role in creating hopeful environments in their classrooms. It is important to note there are only four Mi'kmaq teachers at the middle and high school levels in the two communities of Indian Brook and Millbrook First Nations. The question raised by this low number of Mi'kmaq teachers is what impact does this have on educational journeys of Mi'kmaq students. Many students from Indian Brook and Millbrook have completed their schooling without ever having a Mi'kmaq teacher. I anticipate this will continue to be a problem in Nova Scotia schools

for years to come. Clearly, this is a cyclical issue: poor high school achievement rates, poor university attendance and subsequently poorer rates of First Nations people educated as teachers to teach their own children and youth will result in fewer Mi'kmaq teachers in classrooms.

This lack of First Nations educators sets up a situation in which the provincial school system may continue to play a colonizing role in the lives of Mi'kmaq students. Tompkins (2002) discusses this issue and explains how the predominance of white teachers in rural Nova Scotian schools contributes to the marginalization of Mi'kmaq and African Nova Scotian students. Tompkins (2002) also broaches the issue of minimizing the worth of curriculum that is not Eurocentric in nature. Tompkins (2002) says:

At the crux of the work of decolonizing white educators' conceptions of race and inequity

> is their conception of knowledge. Colonialist conceptions of knowledge equate knowledge with truth. It is 'out there,' it is largely uncontested, and it happens to coincide with the belief of the dominant group. In the case of Nova Scotia schools, it has been about centering that which is Euro-Canadian and pushing that which is Indigenous off to the margins, if not totally off the landscape. Traditionally, the journey in schools has been about acquiring this kind of knowledge that has been deemed as truth (p. 410).

Tompkins identifies a key issue that serves as a primary factor which continues to perpetuate the marginalization of Mi'kmaq students and contributes to their giving up hope in their educational endeavors. Tompkins (2002) also suggests that resolving these

issues will involve having the educational leaders of Nova Scotia understand and acknowledge that a problem exists, and that it is a problem based upon power and privilege.

Ghosh and Abdi (2004) address a similar issue discussed by Tompkins regarding the issue of mainstream culture in the public education system. They explain that mainstream culture is the underlying value system in our provinsial schools and is what the educational institutions are built upon. As a result, our public educational systems become a microcosm of society at large (Ghosh & Abdi, 2004). For Mi'kmaq students in Nova Scotia's provinsial school system, this can create a problem if they do not see the representation of Mi'kmaq culture. Ghosh and Abdi argue that marginalized students are being denied the opportunity to explore their own ethnicity and the school system is inadvertently perpetuating and teaching only the cultural views and perspectives of mainstream culture.

In my experience, as a teacher in the provinsial school system that serves Mi'kmaq students, system-based educators and administrators believe that the system *does* provide an education that gives opportunities for Mi'kmaq students to connect with their cultural roots. I have already mentioned the high school course Mi'kmaq Studies 10, a high school credit course that is offered to all students. However, the issue with this course is not only the presentation of the curriculum but the teachers' abilities to present the information, which is relayed more as dry content than as a living exploration. Conflicts also arise with the school-based evaluation criteria. I discuss this issue further in Chapter 5, but introduce it here, as it aligns so closely with Tompkins (2002) and Ghosh and Abdi's work (2004).

Hamptons' (1995) position addresses the impact colonial education has, and continues to have, on First Nations people. This colonial legacy has served to diminish the hopes of aboriginal youth, who received an education steeped in pedagogical practices which served the interests of mainstream society. From the Chickasaw Nation, Hampton (1995) is critical of mainstream education and its role in marginalizing First Nations students: "For the vast majority of Indian students, far from being an opportunity, education is a critical filter indeed, filtering out hope and self-esteem" (Hampton 1995). Thus, the road to healing and rejuvenating hopeful thinking among aboriginal youth will come from a curriculum that will serve to "enhance consciousness of being an Indian and a fully participating citizen of Canada or the United States" (Hampton 1995).

Understanding how Mi'kmaq students conceptualize hope and its relationships to learning, self-efficacy and well-being is an important step towards opening a wider dialogue that must include other stakeholders. By focusing on the construct of hope from the students' viewpoints, I anticipate that they may provide key understandings about the various ways the community can foster hope and support students who may be feeling marginalization. This issue of how the public systems can side-line students is central to Freire's Critical theory.

> Education either functions as an instrument which is used to facilitate integration of the younger generation into the logic of the present system and bring about conformity or it becomes the practice of freedom, the means by which men and women deal critically and creatively with reality

and discover how to participate in the transformation of their world.

(Freire, 1972, p. 10)

Theoretically defined, hope emphasizes goal-directed thinking in which the person utilizes both pathways thinking (the perceived capacity to find routes to desired goals) and agency thinking (the requisite motivations to use those routes) (Snyder, 2000). From the students' perspectives, hope is goal-driven, motivating, hard work, and sustained by a belief that positive things will happen. These definitions of hope from both the Scholars and students are remarkably similar and demonstrate why it is important to include the youth perspective. They also imply that there is a cognitive process linked to an expectation of a positive outcome. The primary characteristics present in this definition indicate that hope is synonymous with terms like expectation, confidence, and pleasing. I believe it is imperative that any discussion of hope and education from a First Nations perspective terms such as decolonization, self-determination, affirmation of cultural beliefs, cultural connectedness and self-efficacy must also be part of that discussion.

While it is important to conceptualize hope as part of education, it is equally important for students to see educational achievement as a means to actualize their hopes. For many Mi'kmaq students in the provinsial school system, this may not be easy to achieve if the system is stepped in pedagogical practices that do not honor their culture. Teachers need to be made aware of the marginalizing processes that exist in the provinsial school system of Nova Scotia.

Summary

In this chapter, I discussed works of the Indigenous scholars Battiste (2002), Hampton (1995) and Lipka (2002). I also use the work of Turner (2005), Snyder (2000), Lopez (2000) and Tompkins (2002) to provide a theoretical perspective to gaining an understanding of the role that hope plays in the lives of the Mi'kmaq. Hope is a consistent theme in the scholarly works of Battiste, Hampton, Lipka, Turner, Snyder and Lopez, and I used the concept of hope within a critical Freirian theoretical framework. Furthermore, hope seems to be strongly connected to culture, community, family and school, and is the agent of change for Mi'kmaq youth otherwise disenfranchised from mainstream education and society.

CHAPTER 3
METHODOLOGY and METHODS
Talking the Hopeful Talk

Introduction

In this chapter, I provide a description of my research and the methods I used to collect the data. I highlight the practical aspects of the research and include my rationale for using these methods. This chapter is divided into four major sections: 1) Participatory Action Research (PAR) Methodology, 3) Data Collection Process, and 4) Tools of Inquiry and Data Sources.

As I explored the connection between Mi'kmaw youth, hope and education, I was interested in knowing if students from the FN communities of Millbrook and Indian Brook associated the concept of hope with their own educational goals. At the core of my research is "student voice", which is identified as youth sharing their opinions about hope and its connection to education. Mitra (2004) explains that student voice is youth sharing their opinions and ideas about possible solutions and having the opportunity to share ideas with decision makers.

To achieve the goal of addressing student voice, a Participatory Action Research (PAR) methodology approach guides this work. For this, I rely on Walter Haney and Brinton Lykes' (2000) work in the field. Through focus groups and invitations to share their perspectives through talk and photography (photo voice), the students frame their perceptions of hope. At the onset of this research, I believed that student voice was underrepresented in school-based discussion, particularly the voices of students from the two participating Mi'kmaq communities. Decisions made about the educational wellbeing of the students in these communities have never included input of the students. My use of PAR in this research is an attempt to remedy this situation.

PAR Methodology

To fully understand students and student concerns in relation to education I believe we must provide them with appropriate venues to express themselves. I start from the assumption that Mi'kmaq students have not been provided the opportunity to voice their opinions about educational issues that affect them. To ensure that I select the appropriate methodology to address this issue, I rely on Maguire's (2007) definition of *methodology* as the "epistemological framing of an inquiry that includes prior

understandings of phenomenon and the very contextual factors that mediate actions, particular choices of theories, interpretations and representations of others" (p. 8). Based on this definition, I decided to select PAR as my methodology.

I argue that PAR is the logical approach to understanding the perspectives and voices of the Mi'kmaq youth involved in this research. The students clearly articulated their positions on many issues, also expressing concerns about social issues that had no bearing on this research. I state this point to emphasize the importance of engaging students in PAR as a means of information gathering, arguing that to fully understand what students are thinking, we need to ask them. It is my belief that students have an accurate understanding of social issues.

To further support this statement, I refer to Maguire (2005): "Children have good social radar for assessing the situations and contexts in which they find themselves. Thus, children's perspectives and voices are important signifiers of their conceptualizations of the situatedness of their learning, their interests, needs, and perceptions" (p. 3). While Maguire is referring here to elementary age children, the notion is still applicable to older teenagers and youth.

PAR, as defined by Walter Haney and Brinton Lykes (2000) in *Practice, Participatory Research and Creative Research Designs: The Evolution of Ethical Guidelines for Research*, refers to a set of processes and practices whereby knowledge and action are produced by groups traditionally excluded from power and resources. This methodology focuses on identifying, documenting and knowing through interpretation of ideas and perspectives. Mueller (2006) explains that PAR has been defined as a

community-based approach to research, in which the voices of the participants become central elements of the research and their initiatives guide the process of change.

Mueller describes her use of PAR in her research involving school teachers of the Kativik School Board, stating that "as a researcher, PAR offers [her] the socio-political space in which [she] can attempt to do research" (2006, p. 6). Mueller explains that the participant's views give the research direction. The students in my inquiry describe their perceptions of the link between hope and learning, as well as hope and their desires for others and their own future well-being. They were offered an invitational space in which to explore these perceptions. I also wanted them to have a creative way to express themselves using the method of photo voice and capturing images using photography, and PAR provided this space. Students will be given the opportunity to participate in the public dissemination of the research findings in an exhibit for their communities.

Method

Photo voice, as a qualitative data collection tool, emerged from theories of critical consciousness, feminism and documentary photography (Wang & Burris, 1997). According to Nowell, Berkowitz, Deacon and Foster-Fishman (2006), photo voice projects have been conducted with a variety of populations (e.g., rural Chinese women, low-income and homeless African-American women, Bosnian refugee youth) to empower participants to explore and communicate important messages about their lives and communities. As a participatory action tool, photo voice is designed so that participants identify and present the issues and aspects of their lives that they most want to share. It allows participants to both define the phenomenon of interest and share why

they chose to focus on that particular aspect of their life and the meaning it has for them (Nowell, Berkowitz, Deacon, and Foster-Fishman, 2006).

In addition to aligning my theoretical connections with this method, I also examined the use of photo voice in other research with this age group. Turner (2005) used photo voice to study the role of hope and well-being in Australian youth, determining that hope is an essential component of human development and way of thinking and is integral to the development of the human condition. The young people in Turner's study used their photos to demonstrate their strong connections between their perceptions of hope, well-being and sense of community. Joyces' photos clearly have similar types of connections that Turner's (2005) study showed.

A PAR methodology enabled me to have conversations with students that would not normally take place in a traditional teacher-student relationship and to discuss their photographic images. I was very surprised with the candor and openness of the students as they described their photos in both the focus groups and the interviews. Take, for example, Faith (pseudonym), who describes a picture of her with her mother taken years ago.

Photo 7. Faith Hope Photo 'Helping Hands'

Faith describes her photo in the following way:

> *It's of me and my Mom and that was like a long time ago when I was like 5 or 3 and it represents hope because she is still an important figure in my life today and she like motivates me to be the best that I can be….. she is a single Mom and she is like very independent and stuff so that gives me hope that I could like achieve things and that I could be strong in society 'cause she is determined.*

Like Mueller, I see PAR as an effective means to achieving the goal of 'working with my participants instead of for them' (Mueller, 2006, p. 8). The Mi'kmaq student participants collaborated in the process rather than being objects of the process. PAR is described as an evolving methodology in the field of research (Haney & Lykes, 2000) but theoretically draws on a longer critical tradition, such as Freire (1970). Most relevant is Freire's work around 'voice' and 'dialogue' and the disempowered or oppressed. The significance of dialogue and understanding how it can be used productively, especially in research that involves conversations with students, cannot be overlooked. In the next section, I will discuss Freire's work to provide some insight on dialogue and voice.

Freire and Dialogue

The anticipated success of this research depends upon my interpretation and representation of what the students are telling me. Thus it is my job as a *researcher* to analyze the material evidence I have collected and construct data that accurately reflects the students' perceptions (Maguire, 2007). To do this, it is important to understand what *true dialogue* is and its impact on this research (Freire, 2005). In considering the issues of dialogue and working with students to construct data, it important to consider Maguire (2007), who states: "We are not third persons, nameless, ahistorical, one-demensional subjects or acultural beings, researching from a position of nowhere" (p. 9). I agree with Maguire (2007) that, as a researcher, I need to consider the students' identities and ensure them that their contributions to this research are valuable.

Oppressed persons are people who have been deprived of their voice on issues that affect them (Freire, 2005). Freire was a strong advocate of dialogue as a means of

pursuing a route to achieving liberation and social justice. In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed (*30th Anniversary Edition, 2005), he states that, without dialogue, there is no communication, and without communication, there can be no true education. Like Freire, educators must provide students with opportunities to dialogue with each other. He conceptualized dialogue as a two-dimensional phenomenon:

> As we attempt to analyze dialogue as a human phenomenon, we discover something which is the essence of dialogue itself: the word. But the word is more than just an instrument which makes dialogue possible; accordingly, we must seek its constructive elements. Within the word we find two dimensions, reflection and action, in such radical interaction that if one is sacrificed – even in part – the other immediately suffers. (2005, p.87)

Freire (2005) further contends that true dialogue can only take place if there is willingness for the "dialoguers" to take action, and that "no dialogue exists without hope" (p. 91). Working from the Freirian position, I believe that the students in this research have engaged in *true dialogue* and that it is my job to communicate their voice to the appropriate persons. Freire is consistent in his discussion on dialogue and engagement in *critical thinking.* Freire explains that if dialogue does not lead to action, true dialogue has not taken place (2005). On this point, I suggest that, in my dialogue with these Mi'kmaq students, we engaged in true dialogue and it is my responsibility as the research to take action.

In closing this section, I include Freire's position on *Hopelessness* and its connection to dialoguing with Mi'kmaq students:

> Hopelessness is a form of silence, of denying the world and fleeing from it. The dehumanization resulting from unjust order is not a cause for despair but for hope, leading to the incessant pursuit of the humanity denied by injustice. Hope, however, does not consist in crossing one's arms and waiting. As long as I fight, I am moved by hope; and if I fight with hope, then I can wait. As the encounter of women and men seeking to be more fully human, dialogue cannot be carried on in a climate of hopelessness. If the dialoguers expect noting to come of their efforts, their encounter will be empty and sterile, bureaucratic and tedious (*Pedagogy of the Oppressed* pp. 91-92).

It is my position that if educators do not provide Mi'kmaq students with the opportunity to dialogue with teachers, then their issues will be unheard and, as Freire suggests, they will lose hope and continue in a *climate of hopelessness* (Freire, 2005).

Context and Dialoguing with Participants

The more I listened to the students in this inquiry, the more I was convinced that they were anxious to have their 'voices' heard. For example, Susan explains:

> *There are people that… come to class and they're sitting there and saying I don't know how to do this, and they won't try. If you have hope, you can actually try and could succeed and do something. A lot of people don't really look at what's going to happen after they graduate and they're like, just there…Okay, I am going to finish high school. There are a lot of people that…really want to do*

> *something big with [their] life and they have that hope and they try. Then there are people who don't...they just..* (Susan CEC, May 2009).

Susan's comments suggest that she was upset with a particular person or with people and she seems frustrated with their perspective on their education and perhaps believes it reflects poorly on her, too. She states that she personally wants to graduate from high school and be successful but she cannot understand why others can show up to school and not care, implying that these other students are just putting in time and have given up hope on completing their education.

Giving Susan an opportunity to share her own hopes for her education and letting her know that teachers are interested in her hopes (which may be different than other students) may help to sustain her hope and advance her progress. Susan's comments reminded me of another student I met when attending the Kuujjuaq Annual Conference in 2005 in Quebec. I include these examples as they are life experiences that have shaped my theoretical pedagogy and how I selected the philosophical underpinnings of my research.

The 2005 Kativik Educational Council (Kuujjuaq, Quebec) meeting was designed to define the problems and develop strategies to respond to the negative elements that affect learning and success within the Kativik School Board. The participants at the meeting were parents, students, Board Members, Elders and teachers. As evidence of giving voice to the oppressed and consistent with Freire's work, I was impressed that the students sat as delegates and were invited to voice their concerns to the Katavik School Board. In conversation with some of the delegates, I learned that the issue of dropping

out of school was a major concern for them. One Nunavik student by the name of Kevin addressed the conference and discussed his educational journey.

Kevin explained that during his middle school and high school years, he did well academically but found it hard because he always felt as though he was "walking against the wind" (personal communication, March 20, 2005) and against the norm of what was expected by his friends. There was always peer pressure to drop out. He explained that he had supportive parents and a positive school experience, which made the difference for him. Kevin is a second-year Arts student at McGill University. These are two examples that resonated with me as I considered the use of the PAR methodology. They highlight the student's perspectives and demonstrate the relevance of using a PAR approach with this age group. Susan's and Kevin's situations are examples of issues faced by many Mi'kmaw students on a daily basis.

Data Collection and Process

I held information sessions at each school site on March 30 and April 1, 2009. The first meeting was at Hants East Rural High and the second at Cobiquid Educational Centre. At each session, I gave an overview of the research inquiry by first introducing myself and then explaining my role in this inquiry, my background and interest in their perspectives and what I hoped to do with the information they shared. At each session, I was introduced to the students by the First Nations Liaison Worker in the school. All students who attended this meeting were given a consent form explaining the aim of the study and their role in participating. Also at the recruitment meeting, I informed the students that if they agreed to participate, they would be asked to take part in three more

meetings: (1) Focus Group I, 2) Focus Group II, and 3) an individual interview. I outlined the expectations of participating in each of the three sessions.

I audio-recorded all focus group sessions and interviews. Later, I had the audio recordings transcribed into written form. Merriam (1998) emphasizes that "[v]erbatim transcription of recorded interviews provides the best database for analysis" (p. 88). I chose to audio record the focus groups so I could focus more on the students' conversations and non-verbal reactions to what their peers were saying in the group as well as to maintain the integrity and authenticity of their perspectives. This method of inquiry also ensures that I have an accurate account of what the students were saying and that I would not be distracted by having to take notes. I collected the data over a five-week period. The data types were the transcripts of the focus group conversations and the individual interviews with the students about their photos. In the following sections, I describe the data collection process for these data sets.

Focus Group I

Focus Group sessions were held at the Cobiquid Educational Centre (Group CEC) and HERH (Group HERH). My objective for Focus Group Session I was to generate dialogue among the participants about their perceptions, experiences and understanding of the concept of hope. The same semi-structured approach was used at each site to create a relaxed atmosphere for the students. The students sat in a 'round table' group, and I sat with them. I used the same questions during each of the two sessions, but was flexible in timing and ordering them. Five questions were developed for comprehensiveness, relevance and understanding.

The questions served as discussion points to help me focus the group; however, I wanted the questions to be open-ended in nature to allow the students to say whatever they felt was important to include as part of the discussion.

The questions are as follows:

- What does the term hope mean to you?
- Does hope play a role in your life day to day?
- What things in your life give you a sense of hope (people, places or things)?
- If you are a person of hope, do you have an obligation to give hope to others?
- Can you share a story of an experience you have had in life where you were hopeful about something?

Going into these sessions, I was a bit apprehensive. I was worried that the students might not feel comfortable expressing their thoughts in front of their peers, but this was not the case. The data shows both groups were very open and talkative. Some students were more talkative than others, but at the end of the two sessions, all students contributed to the data that was collected. What I did find surprising and very much unexpected was the direction some of the students took the conversation. A number of students were very explicit and honest about their personal experiences. These ranged from personal or family trauma and loss to encouraging stories of hope and future well-being.

Each initial Focus Group was one hour in length and took place in the resource room of their respective schools, which was a place familiar to them. I informed the students that, from their conversations, I would look for themes that would help guide a

group definition of hope. I also told the students I would present their definition of hope at Focus Group II for their approval and editing.

Focus Group II

The second Focus Group session was held in the same rooms at each school. This second meeting had three objectives: 1) to share and discuss the collective knowledge generated at the first meeting; 2) to agree upon a definition of hope based on the discussions at the first meeting; and 3) to distribute cameras and give instructions on how to safely and ethically take photos using a disposable camera.

The first of the two meetings was held with the Group B (HERH) students with eight of the original ten students. I was informed by the FNLW that two female students had spoken to him and had chosen to withdraw. No explanation was given as to why. The second meeting was held with Group CEC, with nine of the original ten students in attendance. A male student had decided to withdraw, stating to the FNLW that he did not have the time to participate.

At the second meeting, the students were given a copy of the information I had collected at the first meetings, presented as themes for their discussion around hope. I read through the information aloud and allotted enough time for the students to read silently. I asked if anyone would like to suggest changes to the definition. The students in both meetings agreed that the statement drafted was representative of what they believed defined hope. Given they were so open and forthcoming with their perspectives and ideas during the first conversation groups, I did not believe there was any reason to think they were shy to share their opinions at the second one. The students agreed that

the statement should stand as presented, and they agreed to accept them as their working definition of hope.

My third objective for Focus Group II was to provide the students with instructions, from an experienced photographer on how to use and get good results with a disposable camera. I arranged to have an experienced photographer give the students a brief session on photography During this session the participants received training on the use of a disposable camera as well as some discussion of ethical and safety issues regarding the taking of pictures. The photographers were both very clear in explaining that a disposable camera is very different from a digital camera in that you do not get to preview your shot and you only have 12 shots. The photographer, John, also stressed the importance of safety in taking a shot. John reminded the students to think about setting up their photos and where they were going to be standing, and to keep themselves safe while taking their photos. He told them "don't stand in the middle of the road or hang upside-down in a tree."

He reviewed how to mechanically work the camera features. Then I gave the students their own 12-exposure camera and instructed the group to take photographs of things, places or people in their world that they felt represented hope. I reminded them to consider the group definition of hope but to use their imagination. The students were also given subject consent forms for people they might want to photograph. The students agreed upon a two-week time frame to complete the task. I placed a code on each camera and the code was linked to the respective student. The linking information was kept in a locked briefcase and known only to me. The students returned the cameras to the FNLW when they completed their pictures. In total, 17 cameras were given out between the two

groups, nine for Group A CEC group and eight for Group B, HERH group. At the end of two weeks, 13 cameras were returned for photo development, seven from the Cobiquid Educational Centre group and six from the Hants East Rural High group.

Using their own definition of hope defined in the focus group sessions, I invited the participating students to take photos that they felt best represented this definition of hope. Most pictures returned and commented on are very closely related to things that were personal and had special meaning to them.

Individual Interviews

I held a third group session at each site. I gave the participants their own set of photos to review and then I asked them to select three photos they felt best represented hope to them. I interviewed each student individually and asked them two questions about each of their three photos: "What do you see in your photos? and "How or in what way does this photo represent hope to you?" I also asked each student: "If you had the opportunity to talk to people in positions of power to make decisions or make changes, what suggestions would you make that would promote hope among young people in your community?"

The first interviews were with Group CEC. I had arranged a meeting with the students through Natalie (FNLW) for June 8, 2009. Natalie had contacted seven of the nine students and confirmed their attendance. The day of the interviews, only three of the seven students came. After some conversation with Joyce, Jane, and Doris, Natalie and I were informed that two students decided they did not want to do the interviews. The other two girls did not show up. I tried to arrange another meeting with the two remaining

students, Mary and Tasha, by phone but I was told that they had left early for summer holiday.

The second set of interviews was held on June 10, 2009 at Hants East Rural High. Sean (FNLW) contacted the remaining eight students two days prior to the session. When I arrived at the school, Sean informed me that two students had moved to Cape Breton and would not be able to complete the research and that he could not get in contact with two other participants because they had not been in school for the past few days. Of the remaining four students from Group B, only three students attended the final interview. These students were Faith, Bobby and Chris.

In total, between the two groups, I ended up with thirteen photo sets and a total of six student interviews. I was very disappointed with the low number of interviews based upon the number of students I had started with. However, I was very impressed with the student responses during the interview process. The remaining six students took their responsibilities very seriously and the data is reflective of that. I am also impressed with the amount and quality of the data that was collected in the Focus Groups and the overall collection of photos that were passed in.

Participants

I have research ethical approval from McGill Research Ethics Review Committee and Mi'kmaq Ethics Watch (MEW) to conduct this research (see Appendices A and B). The Mi'kmaq Ethics Committee is made up of a group of five Mi'kmaq scholars appointed by the Mi'kmaq Grand Council in Nova Scotia. The Committee's mandate is to establish a set of principles and protocols that will protect the integrity and cultural knowledge of the Mi'kmaq people. The principles and protocols of MEW are intended to

guide research in a manner that ensures that the right of ownership rests with the various Mi'kmaq communities. The principles and protocols aim to guarantee that only the highest standards of research are accepted. I also obtained a letter of permission to conduct the research from Director of Educational Services (see Appendix C).

Student recruitment meetings took place on March 30 and April 1, 2009. The first meeting was at Hants East Rural High School and the second was at Cobequid Educational Centre. The First Nations School Liaison Worker (FNLW) and I met in the school auditorium with any Mi'kmaw student who wanted to learn about taking part in this research. Sixty-eight students attended the Cobiquid Educational Centre session, and 40 attended the Hants East Rural High information session. At these meetings, students were informed about the aims of the study and an information letter and consent forms were given to each student (see Appendix D). The students were asked to hand in the signed consent forms to their respective FNLW if they were interested in participating in this inquiry. I made it clear to the potential participants that while no monetary compensation would be offered, a pizza party would be held for participants. As a result of these first meetings, ten students from each of the two sites handed in consent forms within three days of the meetings.

The first group I identify as CEC are the students of Cobequid Educational Centre (CEC), located in Truro, Nova Scotia; the Centre serves Millbrook First Nation. This group of participants included a disproportionate number of females to male: nine females and one male student, ranging in ages between 15 and 19 years. The grade level breakdown for group Cobiquid Educational Centre is: three Grade 10 students (all female), four Grade 11 students (one male), and three female Grade 12 students.

Hants East Rural High School (HERH) is located in Milford, Nova Scotia, and serves the community of Indian Brook First Nation. The Hants East Rural High Focus Group consisted of three male students and seven female students. The grade level break down was: three male Grade 9 students, two Grade 10 students, three Grade 11 and two Grade 12 students. This group ranged in ages from 15 to 19 years. As with the other group, this one was also disproportionally represented by female students.

In the first focus groups for CEC and Hants East Rural High, I used guided questions to generate conversation about hope (see Appendix D). My intent was to let the students talk about what was important to them and to keep the conversation moving by periodically refocusing with questions pertinent to my research objective. I wanted questions that were open-ended enough to allow the students to describe what they believed hope means and what role hope may have in their lives.

In the case of the two focus groups, some participants were more vocal than others. I was able to draw information from all members by encouraging some of the less vocal students by asking them by name what they were thinking. In the end, all students did contribute to the conversation. However, as evident in the data, a few students stood out and were more open to discuss their opinions than others. It is my experience as a teacher that this is normal for this age group. It was my intention to provide the students a second and third opportunity to explore and explain their perceptions of hope through the second and third phases of the data collection process. These two phases were photo voice (taking the pictures) and the individual interview with the student about their photos. These two phases are discussed later in this chapter. I believed these two phases would offer another opportunity to give voice to the students.

In summary, there were twenty students who participated in the original focus groups. Of these twenty, fourteen returned their cameras with pictures, and six attended the last phase of the research and participated in the interviews. While all 20 students who took part contributed to the valuable data that was collected, there are six students who provided particularly relevant comments and visual images that I would like to highlight here. These participants are described as follows.

Joyce was an 18-year-old Grade 11 student. She explained in conversation during the interview about her photos that she is not sure what she would like to do after she completes high school. She took part in this inquiry because her friend did and was not very talkative during the focus group session, but she found the method of photo voice a more meaningful way to convey her perspectives. Joyce took a number of particularly interesting photos. Her photos and descriptions are very striking and, as she describes them, she shows her love for her Mi'kmaq culture and thoughts about how hope is related to hard work and making one's way in life.

Susan was a 17-year-old Grade 11 student. She was very talkative during the focus group session and commented on all questions asked. She took part in the research because she thought it sounded interesting. Susan was very open about the serious challenges her family has had to cope with and was very honest in particular about the hardships a few of her family members have had to deal with. From Susan's comments, you can tell that she thinks that life is not easy and you really have to work hard to get ahead. As she did not complete the final photo voice aspect of the inquiry, she did not attend the related interview.

Jane was a 16-year-old in Grade 10. She was very articulate, and when she responded to a question, all the other students would listen. Jane became involved in the inquiry because she thought it was interesting. She plans to go to university and wants to study law. Her pictures and discussion related hope directly to education. In her comments, Jane also included some discussion about religion and the notion that most people view religion as a source of hope. Jane commented that she was not a religious person.

Faith was an 18-year-old Grade 12 student. She was very talkative and commented on all questions. Faith took part in the inquiry because she thought it would be interesting, and plans to attend university to study sociology and psychology. Faith commented at length on all questions in both the focus group and the interview session with her photos. As well, she commented several times on the significance of the relationship between hope and family.

Doris is 17 years of age and in Grade 11. She was not very forthcoming with her own perspectives during the group session, but was very interested and engaged in the interview when describing her photos. Doris became involved in the inquiry because of her friend. She is involved in martial arts and related her knowledge about this to the concept of hope. Doris also shared that her family, in particular her father, was a strong source of hope in her life because of his work in the community. Doris was not sure what she wanted to do after she completes high school.

Brian was a 15-year-old Grade 9 student. He was the youngest participant in the groups and seemed shy during the sessions. Brian joined this inquiry because a friend did. He took a number of pictures that were sports-related, and in his comments he stated

that, if there were more sports on the reserve, there would be less trouble. What also came through in Brian's comments were his concerns for his friends making good choices and not getting involved in drugs. One picture that stood out from Brian's photo collection was the one of a wrestler and how that wrestler represented hope to him.

Tools of Inquiry

I used three data collection tools of inquiry, namely focus groups, photo voice and interviews. Photo voice has three main goals: to enable people (1) to record and reflect their community's strengths and concerns, (2) to promote critical dialogue and knowledge about personal and community issues through large and small group discussion of their photographs, and (3) to reach policymakers (Wang, 1998). I would like to extend the notion of policy makers and add that it is really the stakeholders that need to receive the messages. 'Stakeholders' include teachers, parents, students, policy makers and community members.

While all three goals stated above are important to this research, goals 2 and 3 are most valuable in highlighting the purpose of this research. The participants were asked to use their own photographs as a tool to promote a dialogue about hope and its personal connection to them. It is through this critical dialogue that stakeholders will be able to gain insight into what these students are thinking and how they may be able to better support students in their respective community.

My major assumption was that students want and can meaningfully contribute to what they may perceive to be in their own best educational interests. Specifically, I selected photo voice as a way for my student participants (who typically do not have a voice in their own educational pursuits) to capture and convey their perception of hope

through visual representation and image. Then I provided them with opportunities to discuss these images in an interview format. In this process, I gave the students their own tools and they had complete control over time and place to capture their semiotics or symbols that contribute to their sense of hope.

Through visual images and discussions about their photos, the students have been able to communicate their experiences and perceptions of what hope means to them. Because the students were able to take pictures of what was important to them using photo voice, the method provided a comfort level for the participants that may not have been achieved through more traditional methods. I have included below a photo taken by Joyce. The picture is of the community cemetery in the First Nation community of Millbrook.

Photo 8 Joyce 'The Cemetery'

Joyce explains the following about the photo:

> *This is Sacred Heart Cemetery in Millbrook, and the gate is closed. What we all hope is that we will be able to not pass over people that pass away in our life who don't move on if they are not grieving over it. And the gate is shut because you hope you won't die soon so you can do what you want to do when you get older and be or become who we want to be.* (Joyce, CEC, June 8, 2009)

Joyces' pictures and descriptions are powerful representations of hope, as were all of the students' representations. Joyce's image of a gate, which can be used to protect or act as a barrier to those on the outside and also to shield that which is contained within, can be interpreted to have multiple meanings related not only to her own future but the future of those in her community as well. Barriers and protective factors can have complex meanings to people who have not had opportunities to share their own opinions in mainstream schooling.

Joyce also submitted other photos and metaphors that included gates. It becomes apparent from her discussion that she has spent a considerable amount of time contemplating her future and how she will overcome barriers to be successful. Using a method like photo voice provides a unique opportunity to convey these ideas, which may not have been realized using another format such interviews, for example.

Furthermore, using photo voice offered me an opportunity to enable participants to convey, express and represent their understandings of the meaning of hope within the context of their everyday lives. Nowell, Berkowitz, Deacon, and Foster-Fishman (2006) explain that photo voice is designed so that participants identify and present the issues and aspects of their lives that they most want to share; it allows them both to define the

phenomenon of interest and then share why they chose to focus on that particular aspect of their life and the meaning it has for them. Within a participatory research methodology, photo voice is designed to provide a medium to gather authentic data on the lived experience of participants and to increase participants' knowledge and awareness of their own lives (McIntyre, 2003; Wang & Burris, 1997; Wang & Redwood-Jones, 2001 in Nowell, Berkowitz, Deacon, and Foster-Fishman, 2006). In this same vein, Freire (2005) asks: "Who are better prepared than the oppressed to understand the terrible significance of an oppressive society?" (p. 45).

The students commented several times in their interviews that during this process they had to think about the things that are really important to them, such as family, religion, their Mi'kmaq culture and education. Jane took a picture of the front entrance of the high school she attends, which is an example of her connectedness:

Photo 9 . Jane 'The Welcome'

Jane describes her photo in the following way:

It is a picture of the CEC logo and it says "Welcome to Cobequid Educational Centre". Well, I think education is really important because without education there's really no hope anyway, there's no moving forward.

This photo shows the entrance to the high school for student participants from Group A. Jane's photo and comments are important to understanding her personal connection of hope and its relationship to education. Jane makes a strong connection between the importance of education, being welcomed at the school, and her hopes to continue in her educational endeavors. Jane's comments and photos will be discussed further in the discussion and analysis sections of this dissertation.

The photographs and student descriptions are the keys to understanding if students identify and make a connection between education and hope. The comprehensiveness of the ideas represented in the photographs (to be more thoroughly shown and discussed in the subsequent chapters) indicates that the participants gave considerable time and thought to the images they chose to share as their visual representations of hope. During the process of the interviews, the students discussed the contents of the photos and were able to share and guide me to view their perspectives and understanding of their interpretations of hope.

Summary

In this chapter, I situated student voice at the centre of the research to provide a 'lens', figuratively and literally, to view hope. I defined participatory action research using Walter Haney and Brinton Lykes (2000) and Mueller (2006) and provided examples from the data collected to support the use of my tools of inquiry of focus

groups and photo voice. Further, I presented relevant scholarly works in the field of First Nations educational issues to support my position that student voice needs to be considered and gave an overview of my data collection process, including some photos taken by the students. These both supported and provided examples of the impact visual images can have on conveying student perspectives. I also highlighted how the main goals of photo voice are interwoven with Freirian critical theory, and I explained how having a goal is central to the students participating in this research. In the next chapter, I discuss my data analysis and provide some critical reflections of the key interpretive understandings that emerged.

Chapter 4
Data Analysis and Interpretive Understandings: Hope and Responsibilities

Introduction

In this chapter, I critically examine the students' perceptions of hope and responsibilities as discerned from their verbal utterances in focus groups and photographic images. I was interested in whether the twenty student participants from Cobequid Educational Centre and Hants East Rural High school associate the concept of hope with education and their schooling experiences. I was also interested in how they describe their concepts of hope and represent them photographically. I discuss my analysis of three sets of data collected from the Mi'kmaq students; including their own voice descriptions relating to their understanding of hope, their descriptions of their photos, and my interpretation of the photos based on their definitions of hope.

I first organized the data into broad units then after reading and re reading the descriptions four themes that express the consistent content in the data sets emerge. From the students' individual contributions and group sharing experiences the following themes emerged: *Hope is Hard Work: Overcoming Past Adversity, to Hope for Better Future, Hope as a Motivating Futuristic, Hope in School has the Power to Leverage Success or Take it Away,* and *Obligation to Hope for Others: Hope for Others.*

In this section I introduce relevant aspects of the theoretical model and the First Nation's scholars works used to guide this research and analysis; three aspects of Freire's work that have particular relevance include: Freire's explanation of the concept of *Banking education, Problem- posing education* and *Dialogue* (Freire 2005). My understanding of each of these concepts of Freire is:

- *Banking model of education*; the teacher owns knowledge and deposits it in students. "Education thus becomes an act of depositing, in which the students are the depositories and the teacher is the depositors" (p.72).
- *Problem-posing method*: the teachers and students learn together, through conversation and dialogue. "The students – no longer docile listeners – are now co-investigators in dialogue with the teacher" (p.81).
- *Dialogue:* True dialogue is an engaging process that involves listening and critically reflecting upon what is said and taking action. "Without dialogue there is no communication, and without communication there can be no true education" (p.92-93).

I would argue using the Mi'kmaq scholars, such as Battiste (2002), that Mi'kmaq students are receiving an education based on the *banking model*. Freire (2005) believed:

> Banking education resists dialogue; problem-posing education regards dialogue as indispensable to the act of cognition which unveils reality. Banking education treats students as objects of assistance; problem-posing education makes them critical thinkers. Banking education inhibits creativity and domesticates (although it cannot completely destroy) the *intentionality* of consciousness by isolating consciousness from the world, thereby denying people their ontological and historical vocation of becoming more fully human (p. 83-84).

It has been my experience as a teacher and administrator for the past twenty seven years that the pedagogical practices of many teachers would be considered as *banking education.* I suggest that teachers need to consider a *problem-posing model.* I agree with Freire (2005) that the only way to move from *banking education* to *problem-posing* is to engage in *dialogue.*

In the following section I discuss the data providing critical commentary and my interpretive understanding from a critical theory perspective that begins the discovery of the power and potential of dialogue.

In addition to Freire (2005) and the First Nations scholars, I include work by Bandura (2000), a social cognitive theorist, who relates the fundamental aspect of human agency as self-efficacy and the belief that individuals produce their own experiences and shape their lives' events. This core belief of human agency centers itself in the notion that unless one believes their actions can produce desired effects, and prevent undesired outcomes they are unlikely to have the motivation to act. In the descriptions by the students they appear more likely to act on their hopes if they have motivation. Bandura states:

> Perceived efficacy plays a key role in human functioning because it affects behavior not only directly, but by its impact on the determinants such as goals and aspirations, outcome expectations, affective proclivities and perceptions of impediments and opportunities in the social environment (2000, p.75).

Essentially, human agency is one's personal management of one's beliefs and how this management affects their actions which ultimately shapes one's life. The students' comments related to their self-efficacy, beliefs and their perceived agency link with their sense of hope and potential educational success. In this next section I share details relating to the overall process of the analysis while providing critical commentary grounded in student voice and a Freirian framework.

General comments about the data collection and analysis of the students' conversations

The students appeared engaged and interested in dialoguing and responding to my questions about hope. Early in the discussions students identified several themes, such as hope being a positive motivator, and how they consider hope in their thinking about the future; however their descriptions frequently were qualified by the effort to maintain hope when there is adversity around them. The focus groups' questions relate to hope in such a way to encourage the student to think of hope more than a uni-dimensionally concept. The objective of the group dialogue was to provide opportunities for the students to describe their understandings of hope from their lived experience and to probe specific situations where they could imagine hope to be present. I used their descriptions to prepare a definition of hope relating to their life experiences that were sources of hope, and in some situations, actions and goals as a result of their hopes.

Data set one:

Students' Conversations about Hope with Peers

The first data set consists of the Group CEC and Group HERH focus group sessions. I asked the groups to respond to five questions about their perceptions of hope. I include these questions in Chapter three. I asked one question at a time and waited while each student had a chance to think about the question and then answer if they chose. The students responded in a round table dialogue. In some instances, the students raised new ideas that gave me opportunities to probe deeper into their ideas. Both groups of students were very synergistic in the discussion, meaning that if one person said something that resonated with another student, the other student would pick up on the thought and expand or describe in even more detail.

My intent was for the participants to develop a working definition of hope to keep in mind when they engage in the second phase of this inquiry, which involved taking pictures and describing for me their visual representations of hope.

The conversations in the first focus groups, at both sites Cobequid Educational Centreand Hants East Rural High revealed engaged and thoughtful contributions from the students. The questions I asked encouraged conversation but were open ended enough to allow for free thinking around the subject of hope. When the students started to elaborate on their responses spontaneously and started to include conversations about family, friends and teachers in their discussion I was then able to identify the general themes easily.

I read and re read the transcripts to get a sense of their utterances and to hear their *voices*. Immersing myself this way gave me a richer understanding of what these students

value and the way in which they chose to share it, through stories and experiences in their own lives. I examined the responses by grouping their stories and ideas in general categories first to get a sense of the themes, such as family, friends and working hard; then I refined the themes. In further analysis of the themes I interpret what the students say about hope. I separated the transcripts according to each response to each question and cross referenced between the groups to identify consistent comments, words and phrases the students used. The process includes conceptualization of the themes out of the commonalities in the students' comments and stories. For example the theme; *Hope is Hard Work* was derived from the students comments ; *You should take some actions towards achieving your goals rather then just hoping to achieve them* and *you can't just hope, you have to work to achieve your goals.*

The students are conceptualizing hope as goal oriented concept and something they acknowledge requires work. The students' comments imply they realize they are responsible for their own destiny and this notion fits within a Freirian critical theory framework. Freire (2005) explains it is the oppressed that must begin to recognize they need to develop pathways for themselves out of their oppressed state. 'The oppressed must be their own examples in the struggle for their redemption' (p.54).

Freire (2005) argues that the oppressed, through education can better understand the oppressor and the forces of oppression; and that through education the oppressed can overcome their situation. From a critical theory perspective the key issue becomes the educational system. For Mi'kmaq students, if education is not perceived as a source of hope they will choose not to be part of it. If the education system is controlled by the oppressor and the oppressor is not willing to engage in dialogue with the oppressed then

the system works as an oppressing vehicle for the oppressor. “Education as the practice of freedom – as opposed to education as the practice of domination”…. (Freire, 2005, p.81).

To situate a critical theory framework to analyze Mi’kmaq student voice I consider the basic tenants of Friere’s model. These tenants are: i) identifying and understanding the issues and forces of oppression, ii) creating a space for *true dialogue* that involves the oppressed and the oppressor, and iii) taking action to address the issues or forces that cause oppression (Freire 2005). Many Mi’kmaq students do not stay in school because they lose hope. This research provides an opportunity to dialogue about hope. The next step is to take action and address the issues that resonate with the students.

Using Turner’s (2005) study design where she themed Australian youths descriptions of their photos related to hope as a guide I group my own interpretations of the students photos and descriptions of hope. While she refers to her themes as horizons, and the notion of a horizon seems like a logical metaphor, she does not clearly articulate why she chooses this term. For my research I refer to the final grouping of data as *themes* and four themes frame my interpretation of the students’ perceptions of hope:

1. Hope is Hard Work: Overcoming Past Adversity to Hope for Better Future
2. Hope as a Motivating Futuristic Factor
3. Hope in School has the Power to Leverage Success or Take it Away
4. Obligation to Hope for Others: Hope for Others

The themes also frame my understandings of how these Mi'kmaq students may view hope and how educators may interpret their comments to make meaningful changes to enhance students' educational experiences.

These themes require the students to reflect and draw upon their personal experiences. I was charging these students with the responsibility to provide me with their perceptions of how they view hope from their world view or socio-cultural context. The ideas that they chose to share with me were from their own experiences, told in their own words or voice. Maguire and Graves (2001) state "Voice is the speaking personality that is recognized, heard, or valued in an utterance or text in a particular context" (p.564). This definition of voice provides a richer, multidimensional perspective from which to interpret the students' conversations about their perceptions of hope.

Their perception of hope seems grounded in their world view and interactions with others and education appears to be only one aspect of these experiences. The students' experiences tend to focus on problems associated with family and friends which appear to provide life lessons and learning, yet different from the colonized and traditional education. Freire (2005) explains: "Students as they are increasingly posed with problems relating to themselves in the world and with the world will feel increasingly challenged and obligated to respond to that challenge" (p.81). Hearing the students identify that hope is present in many aspects of their socio-cultural lives brings voice and meaning to their desires to achieve their goals and challenges me to bring those voices forward to leverage their hope into action. It is really building on their own strengths to move their hope into action.

Hope is hard work: Overcoming Past Adversity to Hope for Better Future

The students collectively, implicitly and explicitly described hope in the context of something that relates to hard work in different ways. The students use phases such as: *"you have to make hope happen," "you have to have a plan"* and "y*ou need to have more than just hope you have to take action*". They describe hope as a personal philosophy or character attribute and a fundamental starting point necessary for everyone. However, hope alone is not viewed as enough to make anything happen. Students in both groups maintain that in addition to having hope it is also important to make the things happen; one must do more than just hope. For example, Cathy from Hants East Rural High reveals this belief in her statements about hope and passing a test in school:

> *If you just hope, if you always hope for something it might not always come true. Sometimes it might but for a test instead of just hoping, you should study. You should take some actions towards achieving your goals rather than just hoping to achieve them*
> (Cathy, HERH, Grade 12, June 2009).

To further demonstrate this theme of connecting hope and hard work, Jamie from Cobequid Educational Centre said: *"You have to take initiative of what you are doing what you're hoping for"* and Mary also of CEC comments *"Follow through with what you are hoping for."* Mary and Jamie are unknowingly expressing a Freirian perspective in their utterances. Freire (2005) argues that the oppressed need to take action and not passively sit back and accept the status quo. The emphasis is on *action*, the students are convincing in their comments that without action goals are not achievable.

Jane of Cobequid Educational Centre expressed this concept of hope relating it to hope and goals:

It's like a combination of motivation and awareness of… like, opportunities. You can't have hope, if there is no way like.. you have a goal, there is you, there's your goal and between us there is a lot of things and hope depends on how much you feel like you want it and how attainable it is (Jane CEC, Grade 10, June 2009).

Brian from Hant East Rural High expresses his understanding of the connection between hope and hard work by using a football analogy:

> *"If you want to hope to win, you actually have lots of motivation behind that. You have to practice too. You can't just go out there and hope for the best. You have to practice"*(Brian, HERH, Grade 9, June 2009).

The repetition in the use of the word *motivation* in Brian and Jane's statements is interesting because first it provides some confirmation that the students share the same beliefs about the role hope may play in their lives, and secondly it gives a direction for educators to know how they can motivate students. These students from two different high schools believe that *hope is hard work* however they also say that there has to be an element of motivation involved to want to work hard. Brian describes hope as a motivating factor, if you have hope than you may be more likely to do something about it, while Jane explains hope as goal-oriented, and as something that can activate one's motivation to achieve that goal.

The common theme the students express in these excerpts appear to be that having hope is important but, to realize ones hopes concretely one has to

work hard. Evident in their comments are common threads of the meanings of hope can link with their conception that hope is also about personal motivation, awareness, attainable, initiative and action. The students realize that just hoping for something will not make it happen. This is similar to what Freire (2005) points out:

> 'The pedagogy of the oppressed, which is the pedagogy of people engaged in the fight for their own liberation, has its roots here. And those who recognize, or begin to recognize, themselves as oppressed must be among the developers of this pedagogy' (p. 54).

Just as Freire identifies that the oppressed must be active participants in their own liberations the students realize they must take action to achieve their goals and the students identify that a sense of motivation may stimulate that action. In the next section the students identify hope as futuristic.

Hope as a Motivating Futuristic Factor

Several segments of the student's conversations indicated that they express hope as a cognitive action or process that helps people carry on and enables them to look to the future. The students conceptualize hope as: believing, don't give up, to dream, something to look forward to and, a good experience. When Mary a Cobequid Educational Centre student from Millbrook joins the conversation she shares;

> *Honestly I think without hope you won't really get anywhere. If you don't have hope or a feeling of hope inside yourself then where is it going to lead you? Like what your goals you want to*

do in life (Mary, CEC Grade 10, June 2009).

Mary's perception of hope is very much grounded in her personal thoughts about moving forward in life. Thus, for her possessing a sense of hope was fundamental and necessary for envisioning a positive future. She comments several times about her future and what she wanted for her family members. Mary later stated:

> *You kind of hope for everything that you do, you kind of hope that everything goes the way you planned, go forward go the way you want and that's basically it. School, sports personal reasons, everything* (Mary, CEC Grade 10, June 2009).

Jane also reveals the theme of future and hope:

> *Hope is life-changing, life saving, like for people that are on drugs and stuff like having hope can actually change a person's life and they can have a future. I'm thinking that someone struggling with a drug addiction or something they want to have hope, like to try cause I had an uncle that was an alcoholic and he basically ..he didn't have hope but if somebody's trying to work on that like rehab, I would hope that they could be clean...you know what I mean?* (Jane, CEC Grade 10, June 2009)

These expressions of hope linking to the future suggest that the students believe that one needs to have hope in one's life to help create positive imagery for a meaningful future. Some of the students shared difficult stories of relatives who were addicted to drugs and, as the students describe it, they gave up hope, or there was no hope in that

situation. Jane makes a vivid connection between having hope and trying to become clean from drugs or alcohol.

I do know that a few of these students have witnessed some very tragic situations relating to the outcomes as a result of incarceration and drug dependency of relatives however these details are beyond the ethical scope of my research data. I wonder how these negative situations may contribute to the person eventually giving up hope. It seems obvious that these experiences affect the student's ability to be resilient and ability to motivate themselves to stay in school. Students suggest that it is important to have hope and look to the future to avoid similar circumstances. The students also identify several ways of leveraging hope in schools.

Hope in School has the Power to Leverage Success or Take it Away

When asked the question: *Does hope have a role in your life on a day to day basis?* The students indicate that hope was a factor in their lives on a day to day basis however, it seems like it was present in varying degrees. The degrees of hope range from minor to major.

An example of a minor event is "getting an assignment passed in on time" and a major event is 'graduating from high school'. Those who had more hope seemed to have more positive experiences and reason to believe they could succeed at both the minor and subsequently the major achievements.

Having a sense of hope appears to be a fundamental attribute of having motivation to want to achieve the minor goals and if successful at this achievement they would feel more hopeful about the larger goals. However, in addition to possessing this belief, there were certainly school-related factors that contribute to their degree of

hopefulness on a daily basis. In their responses to this question the students associate the concept of hope with schooling in terms of gaining knowledge and achieving larger educational and life goals. More specifically four themes emerge:

- The ability to acquire knowledge,
- To getting things done to a level that is satisfactory for the teacher, and
- To have hope for others to do the same

These themes intertwine, making it difficult to tease them apart as separate themes so I discuss them here together as they relate to each other and the students sense of hope.

The theme of the *ability to acquire knowledge* occurs a number of times during session one. Noteworthy are Susan's comments from CEC; she shares specific examples of those achievements she is hoping for but also identifies how even these basic assumptions are a challenge. Susan's comments on hope and its relationship to school include four related actions: Coupled with the emotion of worry Susan hopes she i) could do her work, ii) get it in on time, iii) pass the course, so she iv) could graduate. Susan appears to merely desire to meet the gradational requirements and move on. A number of issues arise here: much like other students I have encountered in the public school system, Susan's educational journey may have nothing to do with enjoying the high school experience and engaging in her subjects but simply putting in the time and getting enough credits to graduate.

Susan comments on achieving the major goal of obtaining the high school diploma but she does not appear to be benefitting from the learning milestones such as assignments and minor achievements during her high school journey. This introduces and weaves into the theme of *getting things done to a level of satisfaction for the teacher.*

Battiste (2005) might suggest that Susan is the passive recipient of European knowledge because she is only going through the motions of completing the assignments and doing so to meet the product expectation not the learning component. I would agree and suggest that Susan is an example of many Mi'kmaq students who continue to experience marginalization by the educational curricula.

Battiste (1998) advances the concerns that mainstream Eurocentric curriculum have served to "turn-off" First Nation learners. Mi'kmaw students who I have taught like Susan and other students like Wayne and Jim have been told since they entered the public school system that they have to get a diploma. Transferring this expectation of high school completion may be a form of indoctrinating students to the end goal. Many students understand the social implications of not getting a diploma and as a result do their best to graduate.

Doing things to a *satisfactory level for the teachers* as I suggest is a reoccurring theme. I perceive these in two ways; first that the students are trying to please the teacher, and secondly if the assignment or product is not passed in it will count against their mark. Products are one form of student evaluation and include formal assignments and tests. Two explanations of the student's comments are: that the students see more value in getting the product to the teacher and receiving a passing grade than having interest in the content of the product or the product pleasing the teacher. Like Susan says, she just is concerned about getting it in.

Susan, Wayne and Jim's situations draw my attention to the issue of hope and education. Educators must work to engage students, who show interest in obtaining a high school degree, in their pedagogical practice and praxis "education in hope" Freire

(1972). Freire argues how education is used by the dominant group of a society as a means of indoctrinating the under classes to passively accept or adapt to a world of oppression. While teachers are likely not aware of their active involvement in continued marginalization of Mi'kmaq students, it does occur, daily.

I believe it would be inaccurate to say that the public school system in Nova Scotia has a conscious agenda to *indoctrinate* Mi'kmaq students I do suggest there may be some aspects of indoctrinating inherently present in our education system. An example is the expectation that students demonstrate their knowledge via pen and paper practices rather than perhaps other methods which are more consistent with Mi'kmaq principles.

Susan's response was so profoundly illuminating to me that I remember at the time questioning what conditions exist in this student's life that gives her concern that she will not get her work done and in on time to achieve this fundamental goal of passing each grade and graduating. For Susan and many other students schooling is seen as a linear process.

In response to the third question: *What things give students a sense of hope*?" students provide insight into what gives them hope and it appears that those things that give them hope can also take it away. In the following students' responses they describe that being hopeful and achieving what you are hoping for inspires more hopeful thinking, or not.

Jane (CEC): *Achieving.*

Susan (CEC): *Like some people experience like looking somewhere positive that will influence you.*

Faith (HERH): *Like I look at hope and like a really deep strong word but*

it doesn't really stick with people much, like it comes and then it can go; it's not something people run to, do you know what I mean.

The students believe that hope does exist but their conversation seemed to flow off topic. The discussion changed from fleeting concepts of having hope, to things that might trigger one's thoughts about losing hope. It seems that there are so many truly devastating day to day circumstances, where their *hope shifts to thinking about others*, such as family illness or addiction, that it again was hard work to have hope for themselves in the face of so much adversity. Hope becomes overwhelming in light of some of the personal lives of some of these students. It is implicit in the dialogue that in many situations the students must be their own example in their struggle to a achieve (Freire, 2005).

Other student's responses to the same question included:

Mary (CEC): *Because when you talk about hope, hope is like the aspiration to do something better in your future or something overall.*

Doris (HERH): *I never really thought about it before like how much people actually do say it but they do say it and they don't use it in the proper context I think. It's just kind of thrown out there.*

Cathy (HERH): *There's like for some people it has different meaning it's a lot like it means more for some people and some people just throw it around. And that has significant meaning.*

These students' comments demonstrate some confliction in their deliberations about their personal '*sense of hope'*. They want to have hope and believe the goals they identify for themselves are achievable but know how much work is involved in achieving

them. They possess a strong desire to have hope, it seems to be an attribute they all have the potential to possess but there is so much adversity around them to be able to maintain their sense of hope. Adversities stemming from worries about others including *family*, such as a close member being ill that they need to care for, or *friends* dropping out of school due to drug dependency, and *community*-related issues such as higher unemployment rates seem to generate a sense of worry and anxiety for them.

These students need to be drawing a sense of hope from those areas known to be strengths for them, such as *family, friends* and *community* and feel as though they can achieve their goals through obtaining an education. In the discussions it seems that the students imply they had very little hope left to sustain themselves by the time they got to school. This lack of hope raises a question relating to how the school environment can provide them with a sense of support and belonging consistent with their culture and overcoming some of the adversity they face each day. This next theme, *Obligation to hope for others,* while initially one of the overall general themes discovered in the first step of the analysis becomes one of the final major themes.

Obligation to Hope for Others: Hope for Others, Others Hope for Them

In order to have a more comprehensive understanding of their perspectives on hope in the focus group sessions I revised my next question and I asked them about having an obligation to give hope to others:

> Mike (at CEC): You mention perception, and I hear what you're saying, you guys are making me think all over the place, this is a question I didn't even have written down but if I were a person of hope, and I see myself as a person of hope, do I have an *obligation*

to give that to others?

Susan (CEC): *I think you do.*

Jane (CEC): *Well, because everyone deserves it I guess and if you feel like that person really....*

Mary (CEC): *It feels good when someone has hope in you and you don't anymore and they're still there and you realize it and you're just like "wow".*

Joyce (CEC): … *um they have to believe in you too, because it's hard to believe in yourself sometimes because you get so sidetracked.*

I expected these students to feel an obligation to give hope based upon their earlier discussions. I expected they would identify people like teachers and parents as individuals who by societies' standards have an obligation to give hope by default of the role they play in their lives. I also expected the students to reveal more *student- teacher* dialogue exchanges that they may have had. These students talked about their own obligation to provide hope for others based on emotions or feelings for others.

The lack of teacher-student dialogue situations expressed by the students in their focus groups is of concern to me and implies the students may not feel comfortable taking to their teachers about their concerns. Also concerning is the fact that only one student (Mary) shared an

example of a teacher-student dialogue situation took place that inspired her and gave her hope. Freire (2005) argues that student- teacher dialogue is a fundamental component to the education process. Freire explains that dialogue is founded upon 'love, humanity, and faith, dialogue becomes a horizontal relationship of which mutual trust between the dialoguers is the logical consequence' (p.91).

When students seemed to talk less I decided to probe a bit more to encourage the conversation about the factors that inspire their hopeful thinking and to try and have the students think about the links between hope and education. I posed my question this way:

> Mike (at CEC): You mentioned or somebody mentioned something earlier about a test you may had failed and you sort of give up hope, what's the role or responsibility maybe of the teacher in that context?
>
> Jane (CEC): *To say you will do better next time.*

I continued to probe:

> Mike: Okay, do you think those are just words or do you think that teachers should have that in them. I have a certain belief and I am going to say my belief about teaching. I think you can have the academic background, the knowledge and all that stuff and be a good teacher but there is more to teaching than just academic knowledge, what do you think?

Mary was the first to respond and offered a really concrete example of how hope can be inspired by teachers and at school:

Mary (CEC): *Like I was failing Biology really bad last semester like there I had no hope that I was going to pass it because I didn't do any of my work I didn't have a lot of time and my Biology teacher, Mrs. Henry (pseudonym) like she was so nice and she had hope for me like I would tell her I am not going to pass and she was like you are going to pass, just do your work , she as like just pass in your sheets to me. She just kept telling me stop think like that you're going to pass and I ended up passing my exam and she had hope in me she kept me going...you know but if she was like , you got to get your work done, not really just looking at me like you're going to fail. She knew I was going to pass. She didn't pass me for a favor or nothing, she had hope in me , she helped me you know what I mean. I think every teacher is different to, like we had Mrs Walsh in English, Freedom Writers and she stuck with them all through high school. She brought them together, she helped them pass, she wouldn't let anyone stand in her way from that too, so I think everybody's different. Because I had some teachers that didn't really care just let you do whatever and then I had other teachers that were like behind me giving me extra work helping me passing in things so...*

Mary seems to be saying that her teachers enabled her to do it herself and achieve her goals through being hopeful. If students have hope and are autonomous or have a

sense of agency, or they can in turn have a sense of belonging that will enable them to engage in educational endeavors. I believe it is this, Ms. Henry to Mary, type of dialogue that would be defined by Freire as *true dialogue.* Knowing that Mary's conversation was the only example regarding positive student teacher conversations raises questions about these students perception of their school environment in terms of their sense of belonging and their perception of feeling supported by teachers at the two schools.

To try and understand how these students may perceive their respective school environments I draw on Van Ryzin (2010). Van Ryzin notes that there are three areas need to be considered in adolescent's successful progression through developmental stages. They may guide students' perceptions of school environments along three dimensions: (1) perceptions of autonomy, which are influenced by choice and opportunity while learning; (2) perceptions of belongingness, which are influenced by the amount of support available from teachers and peers; and, (3) their own perceptions of competence, which are directly influenced by the school's acknowledgement or recognition of effort, and to treat all students fairly, as well as evaluate each student individually instead of in comparison to others.

I would suggest considering the students conversations that very few of the students are in-line with the three school environmental dimensions as stated by Van Ryzin. The exceptions in the groups would are Faith of Hants East Rural High and Jane of Cobequid Educational Centre. Faith is the grade 12 student that plans to attend Dalhousie University and Jane is the grade 10 student enrolled in the International Baccalaureate program. Using the student conversations and my personal teaching experiences I believe that most Mi'kmaq students enrolled in public schools do not feel a

sense of autonomy, belongingness or competence.

In some situations if solutions cannot be achieved in idealistic terms, the oppressed my feel they are limited in their options' and chose to give in or give up (Freire 2005). It has been my experience as a teacher that many students give up their educational goals because they perceive the schooling system as too restrictive and do not have the support or self confidence to negotiate with the administration toward a solution.

After Mary shares her comments about educators' obligations to give hope to others she shifts her focus to a specific personal experience. She recalls a personal experience with her mother in this excerpt:

> Mary: *I can think of something really personal like my Mom like when she lost my uncle, I know they're best friends, she basically got sick and she was 90 lbs dying slowly and I had to watch her and I was the only one who told her that she didn't look right. Everybody was telling her you look good, you look good and she had it in her head that she looked good and stuff but she was sick she was taking stress pills and one night she overdosed on it, she drank alcohol and nobody it's like nobody was there trying to help her the people she would say she looked good but I didn't give up hope for her and I went to my aunts with her one night like she was praying with me and I just said something is going to happen, drastically is going to happen to her and two months later she got pregnant so I was like I knew she was going to get better and I wanted to keep helping her out with her.....* (Mary

CEC, June 2009).

At both sites, HERH and CEC, the students explained using several examples of situations where they felt it was important to provide a sense of hope for others. They believe that one does have an obligation to give others hope and were able to describe circumstances where their teachers, whom they view as having power use their power to give the students hope. This hope giving appears to have lasting impressions on the students, which they perceive, made a difference in them achieving their educational goals, such a completion of assignments and acquiring knowledge.

The "hope giving teaching style" emerges as a key link in teachers feeling an obligation to give hope to the students, which in turn may inform the student's perceptions about the multi faceted nature of hope in reference to them and the obligation to hope for others. As Mary from Cobequid Educational Centre shares, when Ms. Henry took the time to encourage her and give her hope in her she was able to achieve something she did not think she could. Four consistent themes emerge from this focus group data of hope as hard work, hope is futuristic, and hope in school has the power to leverage success or take it away and a strong sense of hope for others.

Using the student's utterances to develop a "student focus group definition" of hope I read through the definition for the students at each site and the students agreed that the focus group definition was an accurate representation of what they felt hope meant to them. I gave the students a copy of the definition and they agreed to use those definitions for their pictures. The two groups' definitions are:

> *Hope is a belief that positive things will happen in life. Hope is something that comes out in many ways on a daily bases. To have hope is to be motivated to*

> *achieve in whatever it is you have set as your goal. Hope is important to have but you need more than just hope to have good things happen, you need to take action* (HERH Focus Group June, 2009)

> *Hope is a belief that good things will happen in life. It is having a dream or a goal that could be life changing. Hope is a combination of motivation and awareness of opportunity. Hope depends on how much you feel like you want it and how hard you are willing to work. Hope is something you have for yourself as well as for family and friend* (CEC Focus Group, June 2009)

Noteworthy is the similarities in the definitions. In the students focus groups, while the stories shared were very different, the phrases and verbs describing hope were similar. The dominant theme that is consistent in both definitions is the student's perception that *motivation* is a key component of hope. In the following section I discuss the third and fourth phases of the research. These phases are the photo voice and individual interviews about their photos.

Data sets Two and Three: Visualizing Hope through the Lens

In this section I discuss the students' visualizations of hope through their use of the photo voice datasets. Photo voice provides opportunities for the students to create their visual representations of what they believed the focus groups conceptualized as hope. It was of interest to see if the majority of the students' photos include visual representations of educational content or context, such as pictures of schools or teachers.

I showed the students their photos and they verbally described what they believe they were thinking when they took the pictures. I audio recorded and transcribed all

interviews. I integrate the students' photos with their explanations. For each set of photos and interviews I looked for themes represented in the words and phrases in the students' descriptions of their photos.

Hants East Rural High Photo Interviews

I meet with Faith, Chris and Brian in the Student Services Office at HERH. The Student Services Office is where Sean the First Nations Liaison Worker has his office. The students are familiar with Sean's office and feel comfortable here. Sean's office is decorated with pictures and articles that are from the Mi'kmaq culture. I explained that the purpose of this meeting was to look at their photos and then I would ask them to answer some questions individually about their photos. I distributed the photos and gave them some time to look their own photos. I then asked the three students; Chris, Brian and Faith to select three of their photos that they believed was their best representation of hope to them. I then sat with each student and asked my interview questions.

Faith

Faith is a grade 12 student and has plans to attend Dalhousie University. Faith selected three photos that she had brought from home that were not taken by her but are in fact photos she had for some time. These photos focused on herself and her family. There are two photos of Faith when she was young, 3-4 years old, one with her Mother and a second photo with her Father.

Photo 7 Faith Hope Photo 'Helping Hands'

Faith describes her photo in the following way:
It's of me and my Mom and that was like a long time ago when I was like 5 or 3 and it represents hope because she is still an important figure in my life today and she like motivates me to be the best that I can be….. she is a single Mom and she is like very independent and stuff so that gives me hope that I could like achieve things and that I could be strong in society cause she is determined
(Faith HERH).

The second photo is of Faith and her Father. Faith explains that it represents hope to her in a different way. Faith said her Dad is always optimistic and positive.

Photo 10. Dad and Faith

He may not be super realistic but he's always an optimist and that gives me hope to dream and be positive and look at the lighter side of things (Faith HERH, June 2009).

Faith's third photo is from her modeling portfolio. She explains that this picture of her makes her look grown up and that it depicts her positive progression into adulthood. The third photo is a photo that was done professionally for a modeling portfolio. I asked Faith to describe the photo and how it represents hope to her:

Faith: *this photo gives me hope because it shows what I developed into and my capabilities and if that's what I have done so far, I will be able to do so much more in the future if I put my mind to it and work as hard*

Photo 11. Modeling

Faith is a very articulate young woman that appears to know what she wants. She dominated the focus group discussion at times and at times appeared to annoy the others students. Shawn the First Nation Liaison Worker said that Faith does very well academically and will earn some scholarship funding for university.

Chris

Chris, a grade nine student at Hants East Rural High School, enjoys sports such as hockey, track and field and lacrosse. Only two of Chris's photos developed properly.

The first is a photo of replicas of trophies for the National Hockey League (NHL). Chris said: *I have these trophies in my room and they remind me that I would like to hopefully, someday make the NHL and get the Stanley Cup* (Chris HERH, June 2009).

Photo 12. The Trophy's

Chris's second picture was a photo of his track and field jacket and he explains the connection to hope:

> Chris: *Well hopefully in the summertime if I train, and I train again next summer I'll go on to Team Nova Scotia for track. I want to be a coach for track and field some day* (Chris HERH June 2009).

Photo 13. The Track Coat

Chris appears to be less talkative than the other students and throughout the focus group sessions I asked him if he had any comments about what the group was talking about. Chris is tall and athletic looking. Chris reminds me of myself at that age, I was the type of student that would rather be in the gym than sitting in a classroom.

Brian

Brian is a grade nine student at HERH. Brian also considered sports in his concept of hope. Brian plays football with the Truro Bantam team, as part of this commitment Brian travels to practice from Indian Brook to Truro during the football season every day. Brian has a lot of friends and is very social. Brian selected three photos from his collection as a wrestler, his cell phone and his dog. Brian's first photo was a picture of a professional wrestler.

Brian said this is a picture of his favorite book that he likes to read. When asked how this represented hope Brian Explained: *Just looking at this makes me think that he came from a family of 7 I think it was and he came to be famous* (Brian HERH June 2009). I think Brian is identifying that you can be from poor beginnings and still be

successful. Brian went on to explain that the person in the photo is Brett, the Hitman Heart, a professional wrestler. Brian identifies with this wrestler as a role model for success.

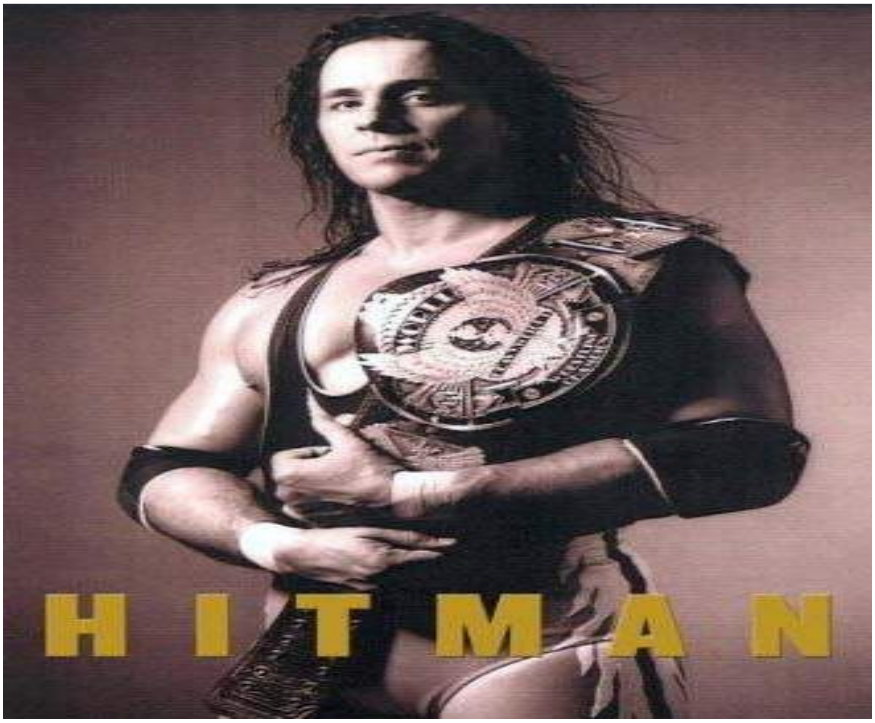

Photo 14. The Wrestler (Brian HERH, June 2009)

Brian selected his cell phone as a second picture. The photo is not included because it did not turn out; it was of very poor quality. I asked Brian how his cell phone represents hope. Brian offered this explanation: *It tells me how my friends are feeling when I texted them. If they have a problem, then I would be there to help them* (Brian HERH June 2009). Brian uses his cell phone to communicate with his friends which is typical for most youth. What is unique about what Brian is saying is he is identifying this mode of technology with the concept of hope. He sees the capability of the cell phone as a tool to provide hope to his friends that may be in need.

Brian's comments about supporting his friends are consistent with others

comments already identified. Brian expressed a few times in the focus group that he had concerns about his friends making good choices and staying away from drugs. When I ask him what he thought might be a good idea to help improve this situation Brian said that Indian brook does not have a place where kids can hang out and get away from drugs.

Brian suggested that if they could get the community recreational centre open again this would give them something to do. Brian explains:

> Brian: *Down there (Indian Brook) we have nothing to do anymore. We need a place where we can get together and chill* (Brian HERH June 2009).

Brian is expressing a concern for some support for the youth of Indian Brook. Community resources for young people are a concern. Indian Brook has a recreational centre with a Gym which is not being used to the extent that it could be according to Chris and Brian.

Brian's third picture was a photo of his dog. Brian explained that his dog is the type of dog that likes to be outside all the time, he referred to the dog as an "outside dog" and can get through anything-implying his dog is tough and resilient. He explained that his dog even likes to be out in blizzards. This dog was, in Brian's word 'awesome' and a real comfort to have around.

Brian explained:

> Brian: *He's an outside dog, he goes outside through all the storms blizzards, well we dry him off in the blizzards, but winter he's always out there. He knows how to knock on a window, he's awesome* (Brian HERH, June 2009).

In the short time I had conversing with Brian it was very easy to see why he had

a lot of friends and the type of person one could rely on if one needed support. Shawn the FNLW confirmed my thoughts that Brian was a very likable guy gets along with others. Shawn said if he needs help around school he can always count on Brian.

Summary

As I reflect on Chris, Brian and Faith comments and photos I consider their age difference and varied life phases. Faith is a grade 12 student looking forward to going to university. Chris and Brian are grade 9 students concerned about their friends, sports they play and things to do in their community. There seems to be a common thread among these photos related to their personal attributes that give them a sense of hope.

Faith presents her modeling photo and hopes of a modeling career. Chris talks about his love of track and field and his hopes of becoming a coach. Brian express his perception of hope through the wrestler photo and explaining that he hope he can be successful in life like the wrestler. It is important to note that of these three students not one choose to provide a photo that represented education in any way. Upon reflection of my interviews with them I would like to have asked why they did not include a picture of their school or some educational symbols to represent hope. The absence of any school or educational representation of hope in their dialectic and visual presentation suggest they do not perceive school as a source of hope.

Cobequid Educational Centre Photo Interviews

I met the three remaining students from the Cobequid Educational Centre group, Doris, Joyce and Jane, at the school with Natalie (FNLW) to conduct the interviews in the First Nations Support room. The First Nation Support room at the school is the size of a small classroom with several round tables that seat eight to ten people. Natalie has a

corner sectioned off for her office. The room is decorated with posters and articles that are related to Mi'kmaq culture. The room is warm, comfortable and the students move around freely, I believe they enjoy meeting here. This was the same location where we held the focus groups.

I distributed the photos and asked the students; Doris, Joyce and Jane to select three photos they believed best represented hope to them. I sat at another table and asked if Doris would go first. Jane and Joyce sat with Natalie in the office area of the room. After Doris was finished I continued the same way with Jane and Joyce.

Doris

Doris laid out three photos on the table and sat down. The photos are the skeleton of a teepee, a picture of a man and a photo of a taekwondo shirt. I ask Doris what the first photo was and how it represents hope to her. Doris explained:

> Doris: *It's like a Teepee, like without the leather just like the wood frame. For me hope is to learn more about my culture. Like Teepees like this year we have a Pow Wow and start hearing the drumming and dancing but l would like to learn more history of it and what it means* (Doris CEC, June 2009).

Photo 15. The Teepee (Doris June, 2009)

Doris's photo of the Teepee was taken at the Pow Wow grounds in Millbrook. Doris was reluctant to say very much but her comments associate hope with learning more than her culture. Doris explains she goes to the Pow Wows to hear the drumming and see the dancing but she would like to learn more of the history behind these traditions. Pow Wow's are held during the summer months and the community of Millbrook holds its Pow Wow in July.

The tradition of the Pow Wow or Mawio'mi is based on a social gathering where the Mi'kmaq culture is celebrated in the sharing of food, dancing, selling of crafts and drumming. The Teepee is one symbol of the Mi'Kmaq culture with its wood frame being the strength of the structure. I am not sure if Doris implies any sort of deeper meaning in taking this picture other than it represented her culture.

Doris's second photo is a picture of her father. When asked how he represents hope to her. Doris explained:

> Doris: *Well like he is like kind of my role model because he is like a native alcohol and drug counselor and I have never tried alcohol and drugs and I hopefully never plan to try them* (Doris CEC, June 2009).

As we talk I sense that Doris is very proud of her father and what he does in the community. Doris is unaware during the interview that I went to elementary school with her father and his brothers. Doris's father works in Millbrook at the Mi'kmaq Family Health Centre as a councilor.

Photo 16. Role Model (Doris CEC, June 2009)

Doris's third photo is a picture of her Taekwondo uniform. Taekwondo is a martial arts discipline that requires physical and mental fitness. The term translated to English means 'the hand foot way'. Doris says it represents hope to her because this martial art teaches discipline and provides a goal she aspires to achieve. Doris explains:

> Doris: *Hopefully it is a life changing, because I want to try to get to my black belt. I am at yellow belt right now it would be good for my health and stuff too. In Taekwondo you have to remember stuff*

like patterns and philosophy of self-defense and a whole bunch of stuff (Doris CEC, June 2009).

Photo 17. Life Goals

Jane

Jane is a grade ten student in the International Baccalaureate program at CEC. The three pictures Jane selected include a crystal angel, the entrance to her school and a group of international flags that hang in the front entrance to Cobequid Educational Centre. According to Jane the crystal angel was her mother's and she chose it as a symbol that represents hope for people in general.

Jane explains:

Jane: *Well it's symbolic, it's like an angel and it has a lot of religious connotations I guess like faith and stuff and I'm not necessarily very religious but I see how important it is for a lot of people and I know for some people when they have nothing they*

always have religion like I dunno like the way Marx said it, like the Opium of the masses it's really true, it keeps people going. (Jane CEC, June 2009)

Photo 18. The Angle

I ask Jane if the angel had any connection to education. She stated there is no connection she was just thinking of how people look to religion as a source of hope but she said she was not a religious person. Jane's two other photos seem to connect to education. Her second photo is the entrance to her school (CEC). When I ask about this photo and how it represents hope Jane explains;

Jane: *Well I think education is really important because without education there's really no hope anyway there's no moving forward* (Jane CEC June 2009).

Photo 9 The Welcome (Jane CEC, June 2009).

Jane's third picture is a group of flags that hang in the entrance foyer to CEC.

Photo 19. The Global Perspective

Jane explains that the flags are given to the school by foreign exchange students that come to study at CEC. What Jane is referring to is the Cobequid Educational Centre foreign exchange program. Cobequid Educational Centre hosts up to 20 foreign students to study at CEC for a school year. Jane comments that the Canadian flag is in the centre with all the other countries around it. When I ask Jane if she could identify the white flag

in the middle of the picture, she said she was not good at recognizing national flags and did not know that flag. I told her it was the flag of the Mi'kmaq First Nation. Laughing said she did not recognize it. Again I asked Jane how the flags represented hope and she replied:

> *I think there is a lot of stuff when people try to isolate themselves like nationally like you have sort of facing our own nation, it's really hard to move forward, but when everything is together like that and it's you got a more global perspective, it opens a lot more doors and there's a lot more hope for change*. (Jane CEC June 2009)

It was intriguing to hear Jane say she was not familiar with the Mi'kmaq flag. The flag displays in numerous locations around the community of Millbrook. I then ask Jane if this visual image of the flags has any connection to education.

Jane explains:

> Jane: *Yes it definitely does. There is this like for the international student program and I think for students and in early stages of education, it's really important to have an awareness of the rest of the world* (Jane CEC June 2009).

Jane's comments have a global context to them; this is different in than the other participants. Jane's' comments and visual representations of hope have a complex view of education and have a distinctive international focus to them. The other students refined their comments and photos to their community, family and the Mi'kmaq culture. These views may be the result of the International Baccalaureate (IB) high school program. Jane was the only IB student participant.

I ask Jane one more question before I complete the interview. The next segment is our conversational exchange about promoting hope among young people in the community of Millbrook:

Mike: *Okay last question and this is going to be done with everybody but we are obviously doing this a little bit different. I'll ask you and you can think about this in any way. You can just maybe list a couple of things or however you want to present it. As a result of participating in the focus group, we discussed hope and we represented it verbally and visually in your pictures. Considering these experiences and if you are talking to some people who can make some changes or do something, what suggestions would you make to promote hope among young people in your community? Can you think of any?*

Jane: *To promote hope. I think they need to be more aware of the successful people who came from the places they came from because when you only see, when you are where you are and you only see the people who stayed there and didn't get to go anywhere, that's all you have to go on but there's so many examples of people who became lawyers and doctors and extremely successful but they just don't know about because they gained their success and take off to go somewhere where they can like flaunt it I guess. They forget to come back to show people here what they can do.*

Mike: *I don't want to read anything into this but you are saying these people who are successful if they could come back?*

Jane: *Or they don't necessarily have to come back. If we could take advantage of their success and have like some sort of presentation of these people that the youth here can look up to. I think that is going to open their eyes.*

Mike: *Role model type of thing. Okay excellent! Anything else you can think of?*
Jane: *I think for Millbrook specifically, people need to be more open to other culture and ideas. There has to be a more sort of cultural education and not just school because I think there are a lot of close minded people that hinder themselves that way by not allowing themselves to gain from other cultures.*

Jane's comments seem to indicate that she believes there is hope and others from her community have succeeded and if they were to come back, be role models, and share their achievements then this would give others hope that they could be successful too. In a sense others have an obligation to give hope. This may have more meaning than Jane realizes in terms of Mi'kmaw students having success academically. The combined staff of the two schools involved is over 110 teachers and currently there a no Mi'kmaw teachers on staff at either school. Also, it is noteworthy that Jane has chosen to represent hope in an international context with the flag photo. This may indicate that Jane would

like to see role models come to her community of Milbrook that are of other cultures with different ideas.

Joyce

Joyce is an 18 year old grade eleven student at Cobequid Educational Centre . Her photos have been included in earlier chapters. The photos Joyce selects to represent hope were the gate, the cemetery of Millbrook and the Pow Wow grounds of her community as viewed through her hands. Joyce's photos and discussion signal the importance why educators need to give students creative ways to express themselves. Teachers need to take risks in allowing their students to explore alternatives ways to show they can meet the curriculum outcomes in ways that do not use pencil and paper activities. The use of photo voice is a prime example of the type of tool a teacher might use to provide students a way to show their creative abilities. Photo voice is a method that will give students a way to feel they are empowered to show what they know. This photo voice would work particularly well with students that do not like to talk or speak in class.

Joyce represents hope as a connection to her culture and learning more about the Mi'kmaq culture. She also provides insights into her perceptions of hope as linking with hard work with her picture of the half opened gate.

Photo 1 'The Gate' (Joyce CEC)

Joyce in her third picture uses the gate of the community cemetery as a metaphor explaining that the gate is shut; *because you hope you won't die soon so you can do what you want to do when you get older and be who you want to be* (Joyce CEC June 2009).

Photo 8 Joyce 'The Cemetery'

When I ask Joyce about what she would recommend could be done to promote hope in her community Joyce said it would be important if young people got to see other successful people and that way they might give them hope to succeed. Again the theme relates to the obligation of others to sustain and promote hope emerges in my conversation with Joyce. Joyce also explains that if groups, like this research focus group, were brought together they could talk about their dreams and hopes and wishes and that might make a difference.

When I ask the question about promoting hope for young Chris of Indian Brook explains:

> Chris: *Stay active. Keep your opportunities open and take opportunities and chance when they come along. More money for sports….like I know two people that only go in Lacrosse and none of them soccer. They don't do very many sports but there should be more sports* (Chris HERH, June 2009).

Involvement in sports related activities, taking all possible opportunities to be in these community activities are seen by Chris as important and hope giving.

Reflections and Understanding of the Focus Group Data

My goal in examining these students' perspectives was to explore the participants' perceptions of hope. At the beginning of this process I naively assumed that the students would be talking about their educational experiences and taking pictures of schools, teachers and other types of visual representations that would show the link between hope and education however what they chose to share is a much broader scope

and potential for hope. The students collectively contextualize hope as something that is found in all aspects of their day to day lives.

The students from both communities independently identify four themes. The students identify (1) that hope is hard work, and that you have to take action, (2) hope is motivating and futuristic in nature, (3) hope in school has the power to leverage success or take it away; and (4) and an obligation to hope for others and for others to give hope. Noteworthy is the overlap of the ideas among the two groups and how independently they both identified the same themes when they responded to the questions.

Both groups of students suggest it is imperative to have a sense of hope but one also needs to work hard to activate or mobilize one hopes to achieve their goals. Birmingham (2009) describes this theme in a similar manner in that having hope is the act of believing that something is possible but it is not for certain. Birmingham says "The object of hope is something that is difficult to attain; it is not a sure bet' (2009, p.30). Through my discussions with these students it became clear to me that they have a practical view of life and some have difficult day to day challenges to overcome just to participate in everyday activities such as school. Having hope does not necessarily mean they can overcome the challenges. Several times the students comment on having to take control of a situation in their life to provide support to others. Susan talks about the responsibility of having to care for her mother after her uncle's death. This was something that was a priority for her instead of regularly attending school.

These students see that, by taking action, such as looking after an adult in need, they are engaging in what educational psychologists Ryan and Deci (2000) identify as "self-determination theory". These authors propose adolescents have an innate need to

make choices and exert some level of control over their learning and to develop strong and supportive relationships with teachers and peers. They also highlight the need for students to be given opportunities to demonstrate competence.

The key component in relation to the 'hope is hard work' theme is that these students believe that one needs to work hard to achieve your goals however there are other necessary factors that may act as a catalyst or a support to the hard work such as to have supportive relationships with teachers and peers. Student's acknowledge that they not only had to work hard to gain the knowledge to be able to do the work but there were also barriers to be able to pass it in (for example getting to school) that would result in passing to the next grade. Their conversations about how their teachers did, and did not provide them with the opportunities to achieve all of these expectations contributed to the adversity they already had to overcome.

These students' perspectives highlight that they possess hope in their consciousness and see or believe 'hope is futuristic' and this viewpoint is consistent with Birmingham's work (2009) as he describes hope for the future as a 'foundational motivation for education'. The students reveal in their conversations that they have hope for a positive future for themselves and their peers and families. A number of students linked this hope for others to education. Jane, Mary and Faith clearly believe that without education there is no chance for a positive future. For example, in this excerpt Mary is very explicit about hope and the future for some youth in her community:

> *It's like when you look at all of the teen pregnancies that are happening too, people are going to look at them and ask what's hope for them if they're knocked up and they're teenagers, like what future do they have?* (Mary, CEC, June 2009)

Mary is also the student that comments one has hope in everything that one does and that without hope there is no future. This could explain the high drop-out rate of First Nations students. The Government of Nova Scotia reports that 27% of the Aboriginal population in Nova Scotia, between the ages of 25-64 years, did not complete high school as compared to 19% of the general public (Province of Nova Scotia, 2011). In the same document the unemployment rate on reserve was identified as 24.6% compared to 9.1% for all of Nova Scotia. There seems to be a link between First Nations students sense of hope to achieve high school competency which may result in higher drop-out rates and ultimately low employment rates for First Nations people.

Many of the students indicate in their conversations that hope was a means to leverage success for themselves, meaning that if they possess hope, this hopefulness gives them something to work towards and motivates them to achieve their goals. Students associated hope with a goal they want to achieve. An example of this hopeful thinking was shown in Chris's comments about his track and field goals. He said he wants to compete in summer track and continue to become a coach. Van Ryzin (2011) explains that students with hopes of achieving something begin to believe more strongly in their own abilities; essentially hope begets hope. This was one of the overlapping themes; when others were successful and came back to the community to show it could be done this gave students hope they could do it too; this creates a sense of positive

thinking about their future; a cyclical process.

Van Ryzin (2011), an educational psychologist, proposes that students with positive outlooks and positive attitudes in school tend to receive more positive attention from teachers "….positive behavior in the classroom may elicit certain kinds of responses from teachers that promote more positive perceptions of specific aspects of the school environment" (p. 10). Freire (2005) is clear on important of the relationship between student and teacher. Freire states: "Education must begin with the solution of the teacher-student contradiction, by reconciling the poles of the contradiction so that both are simultaneously students and teachers" (p. 72). Freire suggests this as part of the shift process from the *Banking model* to the *problem-posing model* of education. The result of this shift would yield better results for both student and teacher.

Listening to the student voices provides a link between hope and human agency, and in particular students who have positive school experiences will be more likely to have higher levels of self-efficacy and positive beliefs about their ability to achieve their goals (Bandura, 2000). This notion of positive student behaviour being rewarded with positive teacher feedback has specific relevance when we consider the comments made by Faith related to the importance of having hope:

> *But hope, it has to do with your strengths plus your perceptions, some people see the bad surroundings and be like well why do I deserve any more, but then some people see and be like I want to get away from this I want to work hard to get away and be successful in life* (Faith, HERH, June 2009).

Faith stresses the importance of having a positive attitude and this in turn will affect your

outlook and self expectations and ultimate abilities. To Faith it appears that hope leverages her own ability to be successful. Having teachers to respond to this positive outlook may be the catalyst to moving the student forward. Bandura (2000) notes that efficacy beliefs influence whether one thinks strategically or not, whether they are pessimistic or not, how they chose to act, and how much effort they make to achieve their goals. Trying to make positive connections with teachers that will in turn yield positive results in school will be directly impacted by the student's sense of efficacy and degree of personal agency.

The most surprising and unexpected theme from the students' conversations was the fourth theme that emerged from the focus groups; that each person has an obligation to hope for others. In framing this question I anticipated the students would focus their comments around teachers and other adults in their lives providing them with supportive comments and actions. The students shared comments of how they have concerns and hopes for their peers, family members and the adults in their life. The students showed a strong sense of empathy and responsibility for others.

The students shared stories of hope for sick family members and concerns for peers who do not make healthy life choices. The students continue to include hope for others and their hope for other's success more prominently than for themselves. Turner concludes; *Hope is central to our very humanness, and is important in our life* (Turner 2005, p. 513). The students articulate their sense of humanness by explaining their obligation as providers of hope to others. The students feel an obligation to hope for others but also expect others hope for them as well. From my observation the students seem to feel morally obliged to hope for others. The obligation to others is identified in

the principles of the Mi'kmaq culture.

Reflections and Understanding of the Photo Images

This opportunity to understand the complexity of various students' perspectives using their individual, group discussions and photo images provides a unique experience to explore the complex phenomenon of hope as it relates to education. The photographs helped me critically appraise their verbal utterances and thoughts related to their visual images. The photos for me were like the birch bark on the wooden skeleton of the teepee- the images give shape to their verbal descriptions and provide a lens to see hope.

There were many pictures taken by students but these students did not take part in the final interview. These photos were consistent with the themes of culture, sports, education, family and religion. Most prominent were the themes of culture and religion. Two examples of these themes are these photos taken by Mary of Millbrook's Community Centre and Church included here:

Photo 5. Symbols of Culture

Photo 20. Hope in Religion

The students' multiple representations of hope were far beyond what I had envisioned. Consider Jane's contributions, for example as she identifies three different themes of where hope may be present; religion, education and culture. Also Joyce's representations of hope are indicative of the complexity of the issue of hope as it relates to education. Birmingham argues that the experience of hope is complex:

> At times we have optimistic, hopeful feelings, for example, when things are moving along nicely towards a happy ending. At other times, we may feel disappointed or discouraged with the way things are going but when pressed we have not altogether given up hope. Some kinds of hope come and go depending on the circumstances; some are deeply held and more stable (Birmingham 2009, p. 31).

These students illustrate the impact different life situations or circumstances have had on their perceptions of hope. I consider Joyce's thought provoking images of the 'gates' in her photographs with the gates partially open and the gate of the cemetery fully closed as a representation. Birmingham's description of hope in many ways capture what the students have defined as the nature of hope. Kathy of Hants East stated:

> *Well, like when you say hope, like what are you talking about? Like if someone says I hope I will get an A on that test or something, it's different then saying oh I hope I succeed at my goals. They have different meetings and significance.*

Joyce use of gates as metaphors and describes that the gates related to her perception of hope and hard work and that the gate remains closed and you have to work hard to get it to open.

The varied themes encompass their personal world of their family, themselves, their interests, their culture and beliefs and extended beyond to their heroes and mentors. Their comments about their photos provide an interesting data base for future studies to better understand students' perceptions of the connections between education and hope. What these students have shown is what Birmingham captures in this statement; *that hope lives in the pleasure of optimism, the determined defiance of adversity, comfort in loss, and persistence in hardship* (Birmingham 2009, p.38).

Birmingham's choice of words truly captures what the students define hope to be for them. The examples I would use to show this are: *pleasure of optimism*, (Faiths modeling photo), *defiance of adversity,* (Joyce's gate photos) *comfort in loss,* (Susan looking after her mother) and *persistence in hardship* (Mary looking after her younger siblings).

These students expand my understanding of hope and education. The students convey that hope lives everywhere in their personal world of family, community, culture and school. However, they also indicate there are necessary ways to mobilize hope and the school has a responsibility to do so.

Summary

In this chapter I present the three data sets that focus on the students verbal and photographic images regarding their perceptions of hope. The students explore their understanding of the concept of hope in a creative way that enables them to use their imagination and creative abilities. In my analysis, I use Birmingham's explanation of the complex nature of hope to show how the students visual interpretations, in their photo's are reflective of the complex nature of hope. I rely on Maguire and Graves (2001) to further define *voice* and provide a richer perspective to interpret the students' conversations about their perceptions of hope. I use the work of Freire (2005) to support my critical analysis of the student voice.

The students illustrate the complex nature of hope and how it is present in many aspects of their live. In their focus groups they define hope into four themes; 1. Hope is hard work, and that you have to take action; 2. Hope is motivating and futuristic in nature; 3. Hope in school has the power to leverage success or take it away; and finally 4. There is an obligation to hope for others and for others to give hope. The themes that emerge from this data show students associate hope as being found in their culture, religion, family and educational factors such as relationships with teachers and sport activities. In the following chapter I summarize my findings and provide

recommendations for the use of this research to help provide a stronger understanding of how educators can better support Mi'kmaq students in the public school system.

CHAPTER 5

BELIEVING IN THE POWER OF HOPE

Introduction

Photo 21. The Playground (Mary, CEC, June 2009)

I begin this chapter with a photo that Mary took of a playground in Millbrook in June, 2009. The playground serves the children at the Millbrook Early Childhood Daycare Centre. In the background, to the right of the play set, is the Band Council Chamber and administrative building. In the first focus group, Mary, a Cobequid Educational Centre student, shared some of her personal experiences that involved caring for her younger siblings and supporting some of the adults in her life. Mary did not

participate in the final interview process. Thus, I can only speculate why she chose to take the photo as a representation of hope based on her comments in the first discussion. I think Mary uses the playground photo as a representation of a belief that hope is in the community's children and can be found in the places where children play and learn.

It's a place of discovery and also somewhere you can be with others, accomplish new tasks, and see your growth and development climb to new stages. Mary also seems to be making a statement about youth and innocence. This playground photo is emblematic of my own social investment in this inquiry. Like Mary, I believe that young people represent our hope for the future, and schools can be their playgrounds as they discover their potential and enjoy doing it.

I want to offer stakeholders such as teachers, community leaders, educational administrators, and even parents who deal with the youth of these two communities, a better understanding of what students' hopes are or might be in relation to education. I see the Mi'kmaq youth perspectives as helping to shape a hopeful future by enhancing their educational experiences and optimizing their learning environments.

In this chapter, I reflect on the key interpretive understandings that emerge in relation to hope and my role with the students of Millbrook and Indian Brook. I discuss my perceptions about the important role hope has in education and how this research confirms for me the importance of student voice. I also discuss the roles and responsibilities for stakeholders in moving forward to improve the educational experiences for Mi'kmaq students (in particular, the 'ripple' effect educators have in giving voice and hope to their students). I present six recommendations for students, teachers, administrators and curriculum developers to consider within their school

communities. Finally, I consider the implications and directions for further research in working with students as participants and focus on the importance of providing students with opportunities to share their stories.

Self-Reflexivity

In reflecting on my research with these students, I am beginning to better understand the complex nature of the "student-teacher" relationship. Specifically, I am referring to the dynamics of the interpersonal relationship of this dyad. As a teacher, I have not had the opportunity to try and understand the impact a disposition, relating to hope, may have on student academic achievement. It seems to have a ripple effect; what I think and do can influence what they think and do. If I have a cognitive awareness about, or sense of hope and efficacy for them, then I will be more likely to act on that belief, providing them in turn with a sense of hope. I understand now that teachers hold positive power and control, in that their own efficacy or human agency can enable students to hope and to act on that hope. Hope begets hope – this is the ripple effect. I now see that, as a teacher, I have a responsibility to consider my own personal identity, efficacy and cultural bias in relation to my pedagogical practices.

Throughout this inquiry, I found myself constantly reflecting on my personal history and re-analysing my memories of lived experiences. I came to realize that my early personal elementary school experiences as a classmate of Mi'kmaq students sensitized me more than I have acknowledged anywhere publicly or have had an opportunity to discuss. I put this in context by referring to Hampton (1995), who explains the memory process:

> The way it works for me is that I forget those things until I unwrap them, until I actually roll out the sacred medicine bundle of my life and look at those memories. I pick them up and touch them and feel them. And each memory gives me knowledge. (Hampton, 1995, p. 53)

Hampton's statement awakens in me a need to make a connection with my memories over the past 26 years of teaching and "unpack" them in an attempt to articulate why these memories became important to me and to my inquiry. As a result, I feel I have a responsibly to take action and work towards improving the educational environment for the Mi'kmaq students in my school board and through my research.

In working with the student participants and listening to their descriptions through the focus groups and photo voice, I appreciate that they can contribute to a stronger understanding of educational issues. I refer to Joyce's contribution as an example of this understanding of their perspective. Joyce did not talk very much during the focus groups, but she reveals herself as a very intelligent and critical thinker through her photos of the gates and how they portrayed her belief that hope had some barriers in her community. I believe Joyce's contribution will be a creative way to translate the links between culture, hope and education information to teachers and a relevant example of how students, when given the appropriate opportunity, possess the power to share their perspectives.

Another critical issue that I am aware of is the 'power dynamic' that can arise when conducting focus groups with high school students, when a teacher figure is in charge of facilitating the group. Luttrell (2000) in the article "*Good Enough" Methods for Ethnographic Research* draws attention to the power imbalances that can exist in the

research process. In my role as *the researcher*, I was unsure how much to share of myself with the students and others connected with the inquiry. Before each session and during the data collection process, I took time to actively reflect on how the students may perceive me as a teacher, researcher, or even an adult. These three roles immediately set up a power imbalance between me and the students, so I was very aware that I should make my approach relaxed and informal.

Luttrell (2000) states "consciously or not, we listen and make sense of what we hear according to particular theoretical, ontological, personal, and cultural frameworks and in the context of unequal power relations" (p. 499). Luttrell goes on to explain that as researchers, we need to be aware of these imbalances and work through them instead of giving up. I used several strategies to neutralize these imbalances, including to be aware of it and to tell the students that my first name is 'Mike' and asking them to call me by that name. Similarly, by addressing them by their first names each time I spoke to them, I included myself physically in their discussion. I also sat at the round table with them instead of standing at the front of the room, ate pizza and cookies with them, and engaged in informal discussions about their own interests during the snack breaks. I had not consciously pre-planned to use all of these strategies; they were just part of what I would do naturally. However, on reflection, I think they were helpful in reducing any potential power imbalance.

In this inquiry, the potential for power dynamics could have been present throughout the data collection process because of my role as teacher, non-Aboriginal adult, and researcher. My major goal was to provide opportunities for students' voices to emerge and to overcome past power imbalances. I was working to achieve an

environment where the students would feel comfortable to discuss what *they* believed and thought, and not to say things that they believed I wanted to hear. Maguire (2005) explains the issue of power dynamics involved in participatory methods research:

> While participatory methods and languages aim to make research a dialogic process with an emphasis on empowering participants, in reality, children obviously have less power than adults in the research process, a fact that confounds the inherent power relations when a researcher sets out to do research with them and adopt a child-centered approach even with the best of intentions. (p. 7)

In the context of understanding the theoretical component of this research, it seems even more imperative to provide ways for students to share their perspectives that will hopefully serve to enhance their learning potential. Mueller (2007) states: "I know that I cannot empower people; they must empower themselves, I can only facilitate the process of empowerment through compassionately observing, listening and dialoguing with people and help them consider alternatives and solutions" (p. 316).

Giving the cameras to the students and the use of photo voice helped to facilitate a sense of power or a sense of agency in the students. They felt they could freely express themselves using visual evidence. It was reassuring to me to see this strategy in action in the way that I envisioned this work to unfold. My role as researcher intermingling with my experience as an educator and my new theoretical knowledge deepened my understanding of the issue of hope and education, as I describe in the following sections.

My Role as a Researcher

I have taught and worked with the students of Indian Brook for fifteen years. In the case of the Millbrook community, my own early elementary school memories were as a classmate of many of its members. In both communities, I am well-known and believe I am respected by many as an educator, colleague, researcher and friend. Research is about creating new knowledge. By using these research tools, I have had the unique opportunity to try and understand student perspectives related to learning and inform educational curriculum content and offerings or changes that can affect the people it is meant to help. This could mean, for example, understanding the integral role of the student-teacher relationship and the power teachers have to 'enable hope' in the students.

I gained new knowledge that is closely tied to me personally and professionally; personally, the memories I have of Mi'kmaw classmates coming to school and perhaps not being ready to learn, appearing as though their basic needs were not met and putting them at a disadvantage to learn, was confirmed in some respects. For example, when I was in Grade 1, at recess, my Mi'kmaw classmates were sent to the office to pick up a crate of milk. Upon their return, they gave each Mi'kmaw child a milk carton to drink, which identified them as different and needing those basic things that most of the non-Aboriginal students would have had at home before coming to school. The assumption that I recall making at the time was that they were poor and could not afford the things I took for granted and that were important to growth and learning.

From a professional perspective, the same is true. I now understand more comprehensively some of the fundamental challenges Aboriginal students face on a day-to-day basis. With this new knowledge, teachers and policy makers have some student-based perspectives to infuse into curriculum guidelines to ensure educational success and

a sense of hope. The recommendations that follow in this chapter are direct indications of this learning and more fully explain how to translate this knowledge into tangible academic achievements.

Through Participatory Action Research, I acknowledge the importance of listening to students and the importance of using alternative methods, such as photography, as ways for students to achieve learning outcomes. In my current position as a Family of Schools Supervisor, I will use this new information with the principals and teachers in my family of schools. This research has provided new knowledge about the nature and complexity of hope, education and Mi'kmaq students. For teachers, it is essential not only to be aware and have a consciousness about hope, but to also act on this knowledge.

The students shared their personal stories and provided a new perspective from which stakeholders can shape educational policy. The students' stories give us insight into aspects of their lives that may help explain reasons for low academic performance and cues on how to empower them to improve. After hearing some of the students' stories, I was surprised that some of them were still in school, given their life circumstances. In my own experience, high schools constantly struggle with how to empower students to achieve success, and this is consistent with other authors' (Mitra, 2004) experiences. Despite this ongoing struggle, few teachers actually ask their students how they want to learn.

Gaps in the Data

Throughout the data collection process, some valuable lessons have been highlighted for me. At the beginning of this research, from developing the proposal to

collecting the consent forms, I made the assumption that the processes would proceed without a hitch. I also assumed that the students who agreed to take part would take part in all phases. This was not the case and all students did not participate in all components of the study. Nevertheless, the students who did complete the three parts provided rich data that contributed to my understanding of hope.

However, the three students who chose not to complete their participation before the final interviews have left me mulling over a number of questions. These three students include Mary and Susan from Millbrook, and Cathy from Indian Brook. Each of these students enthusiastically participated in the focus group sessions and passed in their cameras for development, yet they did not take part in the interview to discuss their photos. What concerns me about this is that each of these students disclosed some very personal life experience information in the focus groups. Mary and Susan talked about having to look after parents and siblings who were having health problems, and Cathy discussed situations where she had to move from one home to another, which interrupted her education. I was not anticipating that these students would share these personal and tragic stories in this setting, but these students chose to do so.

By revealing these circumstances in focus groups, I was concerned and wondered what supports these students had received to help them deal with these situations. The First Nations School Liaison workers (Natalie and Shawn) assured me that each of these students had received the appropriate supports. Because I know about the situations and families involved, I was interested in seeing what photos they would take for the photo voice phase. Mary's photo's included the playground as well as the trees shown here:

Photo 22. Tree #1 (Mary, CEC, June 2009)

Photo 23. Tree #2 (Mary, CEC, June 2009)

What intrigues me about Mary's photos is they seem to represent growth or growing up. Mary's first photo of the playground implies she is associating hope with children and the future. The tree photos, taken on sunny days under a blue sky, are of small young trees that still have years to go to reach maturity, similar to children. If given the opportunity,

I would ask Mary if there is a connection between these three photos. It is my observation that the subject of Mary's photos are of things that need nurturing to grow and mature.

Susan of Millbrook includes the following three pictures:

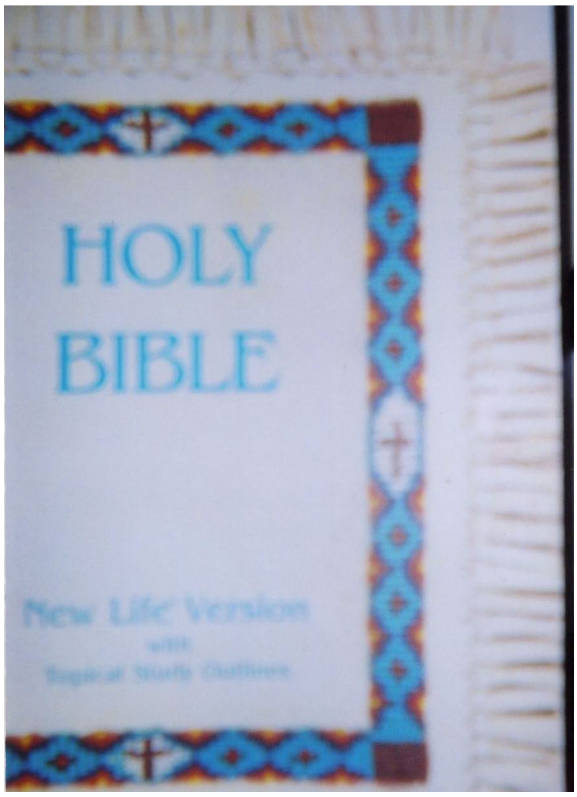

Photo 24. The Bible (Susan, CEC, June 2009)

Photo 25. Wedding Ring (Susan, CEC, June 2009)

Photo 26. Millbrook Youth Group (Susan, CEC, June 2009)

Susan's photos are intriguing. Taken in concert with her focus group contributions, they give me a sharper picture of who Susan is. Her comments always included some aspect of supporting and helping her mother, younger siblings and relatives in daily as well as in difficult situations. Overall, her contributions convey that she is a caring, supportive person who freely provides hope to others. Susan's photos represent that she gravitates towards traditional sources of hope by including the Bible and the institution of marriage. If I had the opportunity, I would ask her if this were indeed true.

Kathy of Indian Brook shared the following photos but did not take part in the final interview to discuss them.

Photo 27. Tree #3 (Kathy, HERH, June 2009)

Photo 28. The Flower (Kathy, HERH, June 2009)

Photo 29. The Teacher (Cathy, HERH, June 2009)

Cathy's photos are similar to Mary's, in that they are of natural earthly elements that represent growth (photos of a tree and flowers). The one picture of her science teacher, Ms. Smith, is out of context with the first two photos, although could be a link with growth from a learning perspective. Of all her photos, it is the one of the teacher that I would like to ask Susan about. Susan may be making a connection between hope, relationships with teachers and how studnets are dependent on teachers for growth.

In terms of Maguire and Grave's (2005) definition of voice, it seems Mary, Susan and Cathy, while not taking the opportunity to share their vocal descriptions of their photos, did share what they value, and their voices are evident in their photography. The themes of these three students include the life-giving, nurturing force and hope of earth by way of the trees and flowers, the spiritual nature of the Bible, and the ceremony of a wedding as well as the representation of hope captured in the teacher.

For each of these photo collections, I believe that the students could have contributed much more if they had explained why these images represent hope to them. While the photos have similar themes to those of the other students, I am left to my own devices, using the backdrop of the other students' perspectives to interpret them. The photos shared without the benefit of the photographers' descriptions are a reminder of work yet to be done.

Recommendations

In my research involving twenty Mi'kmaq students from the communities of Millbrook and Indian Brook, the students were able to provide rich descriptive data that is representative of their perceptions of hope. I confirm my underlying assumption that hope is related to education and that, given the opportunity, students can contribute in a

meaningful way to their educational content. I plan to share this information with the communities involved in a public presentation. I also hope that the student's dialogue and visual images will contribute to an understanding of what students are thinking and how they can meaningfully contribute to this subject in areas relating to, for instance, social justice and the school boards' strategic plan.

In June of 2010, CCRSB developed its new three year strategic plan. Goal two, strategy number one, has direct relevance to this research. These are as follows:

> **Strategic Plan – Goal 2**
>
> *To create a safe, supportive, and socially just learning environment for each student in Chignecto-Central Regional School Board.*
>
> **Strategy #1** – *Define social justice and provide structures to increase the knowledge and understanding of social justice principles in the context of CCRSB (see CCRSB online,* http://www.ccrsb.ca/?q=node/421).

As part of the CCRSB Social Justice Goal, the following commitments have been articulated publicly and are scheduled to take place between the years 2010 and 2013.

CCRSB Commitments:

One commitment is to create a framework for social justice using Race Relations and Cross-Cultural Understanding as the reference for the CCRSB context.

- A document entitled Social Justice in CCRSB will be completed by June 2011.
- The use of webinars and DVDs will be investigated as a means of increasing knowledge and awareness.

- All staff will be encouraged to complete the Cultural Competency Module available on CCRSB integrated services.
- A CCRSB social justice-led team using the elements of Race Relations will be established, using Cross Cultural Understanding and Human Rights as its reference.
- Work will begin on professional development for new teachers, the leadership program module and appropriate social justice modules to be used in CCRSB professional development activities (http://www.ccrsb.ca/?q=node/421).

I commend the School Board for promoting a Social Justice Goal in such a public way, as I believe this is a step in the right direction. Being an employee with this Board, I view the Strategic Plan as a major part of my mandate and use it when explaining targets for staff I work with. I do know that many of the commitments of this plan are currently underway. This Strategic Plan was developed by CCRSB Senior Management Team in consultation with Central Office Coordinators and Consultants. Principals were also given opportunities to contribute to the plan; however, students were not included in the development process. It is under the guide of this Strategic Plan that I feel that much of this research work may be useful. While students were not, as mentioned, part of the development of this plan, I would recommend that students be included in a number of the commitments identified in the plan.

Understanding Student Voice and Taking Action

In this section, I discuss my understanding of the themes that emerged from my study. Using the work of Mueller (2007) as a guide, I will provide the implications as they relate to hope and education for each theme. Through the photo-voice method, the students

viewed hope in their *culture, communities, family* and *schools*. These areas are consistent with the relevant literature as well as with the critical theorists' notions. It is also essential to frame the implications of this information to be helpful from an educational perspective.

While the themes are consistent with what is known, the information shared by the students is new and provides real directives as to how stakeholders can support the students and give them hope to achieve their educational goals. These four themes and their implications for *harnessing student hope* include:

Hope is Hard Work

Communities, parents, family and educators and administrators need to understand how hard it is to overcome some of the day to day adversities of the life experiences of Mi'kmaq students. Even the basic expectations, such as getting to school and handing in assignments, can be hurdles. How can school-based learning and outcomes be structured so that students can empower themselves in a way that they can succeed? The common theme the students expressed in these excerpts is that having hope is important, but one has to work hard and act on that hope to achieve the goals.

As I state in Chapter 3, the students' comments reveal common threads and messages linking with hope, such as motivation, awareness, attainability, initiative and action. By using these words, the students are showing that one also needs to have drive and motivation to achieve. Hope leverages action, which increases the chance that there will be a positive result in the future.

Furthermore, in identifying hope as a goal, I ***recommend teachers*** of Mi'kmaq students need to be made aware of how their own sense of hope for the students impacts the students' sense of agency; they then, in turn, can provide a context wherein the students feel compelled to share their own hopeful thinking. Freire's (2005) conceptual thinking in relation to the banking model of education implies that teach; instead, they should engage in meaningful dialogue or true discussion with their students.

Snyder (2002) suggests that having a consciousness about hope will increase one's chances that one will find pathways to achieve the desired goals. Hope is related to the educational environment; students with higher levels of hope not only set more challenging school-related goals when compared to lower-hope students, but also believe they will be more successful at attaining these goals, even if they do not experience immediate success (Snyder et al., 1991). By understanding students' goals, teachers will be in a better position to support educational objectives.

In many situations teachers make untrue assumptions about what students may aspire to achieve, and doing this may lead to a negative outcome for the student. Mueller (2007) explains that Qallunaat teachers sometimes distance or alienate themselves from the Inuit community because of the "southern actions or colonizing attitudes" (p. 343). In the context of this research, I believe that some teachers may, consciously or unconsciously, make assumptions about Mi'kmaq students which negatively impact them.

Mueller (2007) suggests a possible solution to these types of issues would be to provide "Cultural Sensitivity, Isolation and Dislocation" in-servicing (p. 343). I would ***recommend that Educational Services*** of Chignecto Centre

Regional School Board include Mi'kmaq students and community representatives as members of the proposed "CCRSB social justice led team using the elements of Race Relations, Cross Cultural Understanding and Human Right as its reference" (http://www.ccrsb.ca/?q=node/421).

I would also ***recommend that CCRSB Student Services*** make opportunities available for teachers and Mi'kmaq students to discuss issues of concern. Having regular opportunities to share their perspectives in a forum that is consistent with their most comfortable and relevant communication techniques is important, as are, for instance, drop-by sessions where they can share stories and experiences. For these scenarios, Mueller (2007) advises a round-table format. I would extend her recommendation and suggest this format in order give a forum to investigate and understand students voiced expressions of hope offered on a regular basis. In this research the students, openly share their voices of hope, and I believe it is important that teachers understand that they are important and key to the dissemination of hope in their students.

Hope as a Motivating Futuristic Factor

The students express hope as a cognitive action or process that helps people carry on and look to the future. They comment that hope is defined as: believing, not giving up, dreaming of the future as something to look forward to, and a good experience. It is a powerful motivating factor and the potential of it needs to be harnessed within our school system. Mary (CEC) comments that "*honestly, I think without hope you won't really get anywhere.* Birmingham (2009) states that "hope for the future is a foundational motivation for education,

the role of hope in teaching has not drawn much academic attention" (p. 27). In some of her comments, Jane (CEC) expresses that it was important to have successful people from Millbrook come back and share their stories with young people of the community.

I, like Jane, believe it is important that successful First Nations people who use their education to their advantage should become role models for students. I believe it is important to facilitate opportunities for students to be able talk to successful community members as well as others who could be mentors. Wayne (CEC) often talked to me about an elder who helped him and introduced him to the sweat lodge. I would suggest that this person would be considered a cultural mentor.

Mueller (2007) identifies mentors for new teachers to the north that would help them understand cultural norms of the Inuit. Over the next two years, CCRSB will be involved in beginning a professional development for new teachers. This will be a leadership program module using appropriate social justice modules in CCRSB professional development activities.

I recommend that the ***Educational Service Department of CCRSB*** provide access to Indigenous scholars as guest speakers and purchase and use professional development literature of Indigenous scholars. During the past school year (2010-2011), the school board has engaged speakers such as Dr. Avis Glazes (*Realizing the Promise: Taking Action*) in the discussion on Learning Community Practices and Culture; Enhancing Student Learning; Supporting All Learners; and Effective Collaborative Teams. The Board also

brought in Dr. Randall Lindsey (*Culturally Proficient Leadership*) to host a workshop on creating a culturally proficient and socially just learning and working environment. I recommend we look for future guest speakers like Dr. Battiste of the Mi'kmaq Nation to dialogue with teachers and students of CCRSB. Building on this theme of creating hopeful schools, the next theme acknowledges the power of hope.

Hope in School has the Power to Leverage Success or Take it Away

Birmingham (2009) states: "the essence of teaching and learning requires hope" (p. 38). In my conversations with the student participants, I learned that they understood the dimensions of hope and the importance of having it in their life. The question that needs urgently to be asked is: Do teachers understand the importance of hope in their practice? As Mary (CEC) identified in her focus group, it was her science teacher, Ms. Henry, who offered words of hope and helped her be successful. As a result of my conversations with Mary and the other students, I know they all want to be successful in their schooling and they believe it is very important to finish high school.

Creating environments for student-teacher relationships to flourish, where teachers and educators recognize the depth of commitment on the part of the First Nations student and provide them with the opportunities to show their strengths and excel, is imperative. This research experience afforded me new appreciation for students' intimate connection and commitment to the Mi'kmaq Culture.

I suggest that teachers need to understand this commitment and give students formal venues to demonstrate and celebrate their culturally based knowledge through their curriculum areas. This would help support the Mi'kmaw students to celebrate their knowledge, see themselves and their culture in their schools, and enhance the learning of other students in their classrooms. To provide teachers with an opportunity to learn more about the Mi'kmaq culture, I ***recommend CCRSB*** designate in-service days for the teachers of Hants East Rural High and Cobequid Educational Centre based on Mi'kmaq culture. I likewise encourage students and community involvement in the development of the content for this in-service.

In addition, this will be an excellent opportunity to expose teachers and administrators to the ***Mi'kmaq Rules of Protocols*** (a resource guide from the Nova Scotia Department of Education and Culture http://www.mikmaqculture.com). These protocols are the unwritten rule the Mi'kmaq people have been practicing for generations. I would also suggest that each site, HERH and CEC develop a Social Justice Committee made up of teachers, an administrator and students (Mi'kmaq and non-native) to insure the commitments made by the Board under the Social Justice Goals are addressed.

CCRSB needs to create structures where some of the basic barriers can be overcome and the expectations of passing and graduating are realistic and achievable goals for Mi'kmaw students. It was disarming as a teacher to hear some of the students' comments that imply that they did not share the basic assumption that they will graduate. I believe that teachers have the abilities to

provide the support within their course expectations that failing is not an option. Birmingham (2007) explains that a basic disposition that all teachers should possess is the 'belief that all students can learn' and that teachers have an obligation to promote hope in their practice. This leads logically to the next theme that the student's identified – the role of hoping for others.

Obligation to Hope for Others

When I began my doctoral dissertation one of my concerns was whether I could conduct research in the area of First Nations Education that would contribute to or extend the knowledge base that currently exists. I know now that my contribution of knowledge is as a facilitator of what the participating students offer to the subject area. In saying this, I suggest that it is the students who have contributed to the knowledge base by providing their critical insights through the discussion and photos of hope. This finding is one of the highlights of this inquiry. The students said there is an "*obligation to give hope*", and that they do have an obligation to give others hope. They also describe circumstances where their teachers gave them hope.

Birmingham (2007) states: "As long as there are teachers and students, there will be hope: teachers' hope in students and teachers' hope in themselves to meet the challenges of their work" (p. 38). As I stated in Chapter 3: "The hope-giving teaching style is an educational factor that appears in this data to be a key link in giving hope to the students and in turn informing the student's perceptions about the multi-faceted nature of hope." I believe this is an area that should be explored in future research.

Building on the student's natural trait to hope for others and engaging them in supporting their own First Nation and non-First Nation classmates to learn in areas where they excel has potential. This could involve offering formal discussion groups at school sites and would also involve exploring 'student voice' research in greater detail. Mitra (2004) explains:

> Efforts to increase student voice can create meaningful experiences that help to meet the developmental needs of youth—and particularly for those students who otherwise would not find meaning in their school experiences. Participating in these groups help (1) to instill agency in student, or belief that they could transform themselves and the institutions that affect them, (2) to acquire the skills and competencies to work toward these changes, and (3) to establish meaningful relationships with adults and the peers that create greater connections to each other. (p. 681)

Teachers need to create a 'dialogical space' with their students so they can speak and listen to each other (Mueller, 2006, p. 346). I believe stakeholders need to investigate and understand students voiced expressions of hope and share their voices of hope to teachers of CCRSB in support of stronger teaching practices for our FN students of CCRSB.

Reflective Comments

The schools of both communities, Indian Brook and Millbrook, must become the 'ambassadors of hope' for all students, but especially for those who are being marginalized by the system. Schools must adopt pedagogical practices that encourage hope in students. Educators of Aboriginal students must be competent in understanding

the needs of their student body and adopt practices that work toward the decolonization of mainstream education. Educators need to understand how to *harness student hope*, acknowledging that it is the educational setting that has the ability to make or break hopefulness in students: "Not only does the school curriculum lend itself to hope enhancement, but it also can reach many children at one time. Indeed, teachers are in an ideal position to increase substantially their student's hope" (McDermott & Hastings in Snyder, p. 186).

Health Canada (1989-90) reported that students who have positive school experiences are less likely to be involved in health risk behaviours. It is the people who make up the educational community that can contribute in helping students be hopeful about their future. The conversations and themes discovered in this research shed new knowledge on how schools can give their major stakeholders an opportunity to contribute and succeed like never before. The participating students provide the policy makers with a youth perspective of the antecedents of hope. As Birmingham (2009) points out: "Hope can encourage, sustain and bring comfort in hardship. Hope can grow and hope can be lost. Hope can be nurtured, and hope can be destroyed (p. 27)."

The similarity of these published words to the same themes conveyed by the students is remarkable. In the words of the students:

> Hope is a belief that good things will happen in life. It is having a dream or a goal that could be life-changing. Hope is a combination of motivation and awareness of opportunity. Hope depends on how much you feel like you want it and how hard you are willing to work. Hope is something you have for yourself as well as for family and friends. (Student Focus Groups, CEC & HERH ,May 2009)

I believe Jane said it best: “Without hope, there is really nothing”. It is now important not only to acknowledge but act on this information by sharing it with the community, students, teachers and administrators what we now know about the powerful connection between hope and education for Mi’kmaq students.

As a result of this inquiry, I know that, to enhance Mi’kmaq student’s academic achievements, educators must give them opportunities to share information about themselves so that they can actualize their sense of human agency. This seems to be a common sense direction for how to proceed. One of the Mi’kmaq Rules of Protocol states: “Common sense must be used when making decisions or choices. Common sense is valued as much as formal education” (a resource guide from the Nova Scotia Department of Education and Culture http://www.mikmaqculture.com, p. 2). In remaining true to the Mi’kmaq Principle of having an obligation to others and using common sense, we are obligated now to move this new knowledge into action.

As I reflect upon what this dissertation contributes to the field of knowledge in the area of First Nations educational issues I would identify three key aspects:

- The importance of considering *student voice,*
- The importance of being able to conduct Participatory Action Research and,
- The importance of doing professional development with teachers of Mi’kmaw students.

To support Mi’kmaw students that choose to attend provincial schools educators must consider and understand the individual needs of these students. Providing an opportunity

to hear student's voice regarding what they need to achieve their educational goals and respecting and using their perspectives will enhance their likelihood of success.

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Appendix D

Information Letter of Consent for Participants.

Investigator: Michael Topshee PhD(c)

Study Title: Educational Hope in Focus: First Nations Youth Perspective Using Photovoice: Providing a Lens to View Hope

Introduction

I am a teacher with the Chignecto Regional School Board (CRSB). I am currently in a curriculum consultant role. I am also doing graduate doctoral studies in the Department of Integrated Studies in Education, Culture and Values program at McGill University. This work centers on understanding how to enhance Mi'kmaq youth learning, such as curriculum and classroom strategies. At this time I would like to introduce the research study that I am developing for my thesis work. The objectives of my inquiry are to:

- understand the process by which various strengths of the communities can be expanded upon to help foster hope within their youth;
- integrate Indigenous perspectives of hope and build Indigenous capacity through participatory research design and implementation;
- support innovative development by communicating results widely to Indigenous organizations, schools, media and communities and
- give voice to youth about their perceptions of hope.

It is important that you understand the purpose of the study, how it may affect you, the risks and benefits of taking part and what you will be asked to do if you choose to participate. **Taking part is entirely voluntary (your choice).** If you have any questions that this form does not answer, the principal investigator Michael Topshee can give you further information and can be reached at (902) 893-1736.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this inquiry is to discover what Mi'kmaq teenagers describe and represent as their sense of hope.

The Study

If you choose to participate in this study you will be asked to:

- participate in a focus group that will meet four times (30-45 minutes per meeting),
- provide your demographic information (name, age, grade and community),
- you will be given a disposable camera and asked to take photographs in your community that you feel represent hope and
- once the photographs are developed you will be invited to share, with the group, what the pictures mean to you.

Confidentiality

In order to protect your privacy individual responses in the group sessions will not be reported. Only grouped data will be reported on in a public format in an exhibit. You will be assigned an alternate factious first name that can be link to your responses to questions, pictures and recorded discussion addressed during the focus group. All data will be kept separate from your demographic information to protect your privacy.

If the results of the study are reported in a publication, this document will not contain any information that would identify you as a participant. Study records will be stored in a locked area and will be kept for 5 years post publication as required by the Research Ethics Board. The Research Ethics Board Audit Committee may choose to review these records at any time as part of their audit review process.

Potential Harms

There are no anticipated risks for harm in participating in this study.

Potential Benefits

There is no guarantee that you will experience any benefits as a result of participating in this study.

Research Rights

Your return of this completed consent form demonstrates that you understood to your satisfaction the information about the research study and represents your consent to participate in the study.

If you have any questions at any time during or after the study, or about the research in general you may contact: Michael Topshee CCRSB, (902) 883-5374, topsheem@ccrsb.ca or (902) 890-9874 (cell). You may also contact my study supervisor: Dr. Mary Maguire, McGill University, (514) 694-7693 or mary.maguire@mcgill.ca

If you have any questions or concerns about your rights as a participant in this study please contact the **McGill Research Ethics Office at (514) 398-6831.**

Agreement:

Your signature below indicates that you have read the information in this agreement and have had a chance to ask any questions you have about the study. Your signature also indicates that you agree to be in the study and have been told that you can change your mind and withdraw your consent to participate at any time. You will be given a copy of this agreement.

You have been told that by signing this consent agreement you are not giving up any of your legal rights.

I agree to be tape-recorded _____ YES _____ NO

I agree the tape may be used as described above _____YES _____NO

_____ Researcher's signature _____
Signature of Participant

_____
Signature of Parent (If participant is under 18 yrs.)

_____ Date _____
Name of Participant (print)

Appendix E

ACKNOWLEDGMENT AND RELEASE

Title of Research Project: *Educational Hope: First Nations Youth Perspective Using Photo voice: Providing a Lens to View Hope*

Investigator: Michael Topshee PhD(candidate) I am taking pictures for a research study. The pictures are visual representations of what hope means to me. I would like your permission to include this photo of you to help me present my representation of what hope means. It is your right to refuse or to consent to have your picture taken.
By signing below, you:

- Are providing me with consent to take your picture and possibly include the photo in the research project.
- Understand that there is a possibility that these pictures my be used publicly in a written report, presentation, dissertation and public exhibit.
- Are aware that the researcher will take steps to protect your privacy and confidentiality at all times.

If you have any questions about this project you may contact:

Michael Topshee CCRSB, (902) 883-5374, topsheem@ccrsb.ca or (902) 890-9874 (cell). You may also contact my study supervisor: Dr. Mary Maguire, McGill University, (514) 694-7693 or mary.maguire@mcgill.ca You may also contact the **McGill Research Ethics Office at (514) 398-6831.**

Please check one:
____ I want to be identified by the following name: _____
____ I want to be identified by my **first** name in any project report or publications
____ Do NOT use a nickname or my first name to identify me.

_____
Signature & Date

_____
Signature of parent/guardian (If you are under the age of 18 yrs.)
Name of person who obtained consent: _____