

INSIGHTS FOUND IN THE NARRATIVES OF NON-ABORIGINAL  
TEACHERS WORKING WITH ABORIGINAL STUDENTS

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By

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## **Abstract**

This qualitative case study explored the response of four practicing non-Aboriginal teachers related to preservice training and effectiveness. Each of the participants involved in this research project was an experienced teacher with a minimum of five years of teaching experience. This case study is framed within the conceptual context of cultural responsiveness. The research questions were: What do four non-Aboriginal teachers with over five years experience working with Aboriginal students describe as qualities of effective teaching in this context? What are some of the major social justice issues that teachers need to address in order to be both successful and effective when working with Aboriginal students?

Methods for data collection included semi-structured interviews during which the participants shared their stories. These conversations were audio taped and the audio tape recordings were transcribed. The transcriptions were analyzed to determine insights from the stories.

Those teachers who are interested in learning about being an effective teacher of Aboriginal students will find the stories insightful. While the researcher and participants were non-Aboriginal the stories may be helpful for all teachers, regardless of their ethnic or cultural background, as they work with both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students. The implications of this study are that further research is needed in the areas of Teacher Education, Culturally Responsive Pedagogy, and Teacher Effectiveness.

## **Acknowledgments**

This has been a long journey. I knew that it would be challenge, that it would test my patience and capacity, but I also knew that the challenge would be worth the effort. Although my name appears on this paper, it was not a solo journey. There were many people who have offered their support, encouragement, ideas and time to help me complete this project. The College of Education, particularly the Department of Curriculum Studies has provided me with support and opportunities for personal and professional growth. I particularly wish to thank my advisor, Dr. Geraldine Balzer, who has mentored me through the process and provided timely advice to help overcome the obstacles that I've faced. Dr. Shaun Murphy and Dr. Bev Brenna, thank-you for serving on my committee and providing your insights, expertise, encouragement and patience during this journey.

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## **Chapter 1**

### **Beginning The Journey**

When teachers enter their classroom for the first time they face many hurdles and challenges. They must rely on their life experiences and education to be able to meet and successfully overcome those obstacles. I entered university to become a teacher and experienced similar situations. I attended both elementary and secondary school in a city, and I fully expected that when I had my degree I would naturally begin teaching in the type of schools that I knew well. I believed that my time spent at the university had prepared me adequately to assume the duties and responsibilities of a classroom teacher. My first classroom proved to be much different than what I expected to encounter. I have also found that Today's classroom may be vastly different from the one I experienced as a student, undergrad and beginning teacher.

I began my career and have spent most of it in rural Saskatchewan. Not only was I teaching in these small communities, but I was also living and raising a family in them. My pre-service training failed to mention, let alone prepare me to any degree, for this potentiality. Yet, the ability to adapt is really crucial to determining the success in teaching/living in rural Saskatchewan. Fortunately for me, this dynamic was for the most part easily overcome. Although I had not been raised in a small community, I was racially, culturally, religiously and in many other respects similar to the residents of these rural communities. That being said, although being adequately prepared to assume the demands of my teaching position, it did take some time for me to adjust to living in small rural communities.

As a student, student teacher, and beginning teacher I found the classroom to be predominantly populated by students who were white middle class. There were always a few students of other cultures and races present, but certainly their numbers were small. It was not

until later in my career when this dynamic began to change and cultural diversity began to be more noticeable.

One of the most interesting aspects of this change has been the increase in the number of Aboriginal students in today's classroom. Carr-Stewart (2003) stated:

The provincial school enrolment, as expected, reflects the Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal population factors: thus although the non-Aboriginal school population declined, the Aboriginal school population grew from approximately 39,200 to 51,900 students in the decade before 2001. (p.225)

I began the northern stage of my teaching career after many years of teaching and living in rural Saskatchewan. In the early stages of my career I had a few Aboriginal students in my classroom. By and large they were a silent minority that appeared as inactive participants. At the time I was not truly aware of why they behaved this way. I have since learned that my perception was wrong. It was not until I went to teach on an isolated northern reserve that I encountered the real challenges facing Aboriginal students and came face to face with my own bias.

When the opportunity came to take my career to the north I had many years of experience, both in the classroom, in the school, and in life. This level of experience and maturity allowed me to meet the new challenges I would face from a position of strength. Harper (2000) explains that this is not always the case:

It may be true that first-year teachers generally struggle with the purposes and parameters of teaching and learning. Nonetheless, the current social and political climate in the North makes the struggle to define one's work much more acute, and in the interests of First Nations' students and their families much more important to configure with the community. (p. 147)



This study will explore the Insights found in the Narratives of non-Aboriginal teachers working with Aboriginal students. The research will focus around the questions: What do four non-Aboriginal teachers with over five years experience working with Aboriginal students describe as qualities of effective teaching in this context? What are some of the major social justice issues that teachers need to address in order to be both successful and effective when working with Aboriginal students? The purpose of this research is to consider the interaction between teachers' perceptions of effective practices and the practical demands of today's classroom.

This research will encompass a broader definition of Aboriginal students to include status, non-status, and Métis students. Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development Canada provides the following clarification of these terms (2011):

'Aboriginal peoples' is a collective name for the original peoples of North America and their descendants. The Canadian constitution recognizes three groups of Aboriginal people: Indians (commonly referred to as First Nations), Métis and Inuit. These are three distinct peoples with unique histories, languages, cultural practices and spiritual beliefs. More than one million people in Canada identify themselves as an Aboriginal person, according to the 2006 Census.

As such, Aboriginal students maybe found in any classroom in any community. Therefore, this study will consider non-Aboriginal teachers working with Aboriginal students in a variety of locations ranging from a Northern Reserve school and community, southern and central rural communities and an urban community.

I have fully embraced in my career the concepts put forth in the School<sup>Plus</sup> ideal<sup>1</sup>. School<sup>Plus</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The School<sup>Plus</sup> initiative in Saskatchewan is the result of public consultations undertaken by the Role of the School Task Force (1999– 2001), which consulted with the public to identify

held much promise for education in Saskatchewan. For far too long Aboriginal people have been treated as second-class citizens within the educational community. School<sup>Plus</sup> was intended as a means to bridge that gap. Carr-Stewart (2003) stated: “It is purposely designed to provide quality education and equity of educational opportunities for all residents of the province while fostering community identity and supporting community involvement and decision-making” (p. 231).

According to a retired Superintendent of Education, Gardiner (2011), “School<sup>Plus</sup> was derailed by school division amalgamation”. In addition the initiatives of Curriculum Renewal and Assessment for Learning took the eyes of many schools, school jurisdictions and the Ministry of Education off the ball of School<sup>Plus</sup>. However, the ideals of School<sup>Plus</sup>, that have been revisited in the new Saskatchewan initiative of Student First, combined with the new federal initiative of the First Nations Student Success Plan (FNSSP) has the potential to set a new course for Aboriginal education in Saskatchewan.

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expectations for the role of the school in meeting the emerging needs of children and youth in the 21st century. The findings of the Task Force were accepted by the government of Saskatchewan in 2002 and supported by seven human-service departments. The Task Force Report acknowledged that schools have two key functions to fulfill: they must continue to nurture the development of the whole child intellectually, socially, spiritually, emotionally and physically; but in the future they must also serve more coherently as centres at the community level for the delivery of appropriate and integrated education, social, health, recreation, culture, justice and other services for children and their families.

The School<sup>Plus</sup> initiative is based on the attainment of five goals: all Saskatchewan children and youth should have access to the supports they need for school and life success; the well-being and education of children and youth is a shared responsibility; a harmonious and shared future with Aboriginal peoples is envisioned; high-quality services and supports will be linked to schools at the community level; and there will be strengthened capacity for high-quality and integrated learning and support programs. School<sup>Plus</sup> development is being guided by three mutually supportive strategies: community engagement and action planning; integrating school-linked services; and strengthening educational capacity. School<sup>Plus</sup> is an ambitious plan to provide the opportunity for all children and youth to achieve excellence in learning and life; the opportunity for all communities to share in supporting children and youth as they learn and grow; and the opportunity for every citizen in our province to share in the promise of a prosperous future.

While these initiatives provide the framework for revitalization of delivery of services for many students, particularly Aboriginal students, this framework does not take away from the role of the classroom teacher. If anything the teacher's role is now more crucial than ever to ensure student success. Hargreaves and Fullan (2012) stated: "good learning comes from good teaching" (p. 13).

A key to good teaching is for teachers to engage in a process of self-reflection. The focus must be on taking an open and honest look at their personal biases and preconceived notions of teaching and learning with the intended purpose to evoke action of change or improvement. Freire (1989) identified this as "praxis: reflection and action upon the world in order to transform it" (p. 36). I know that I began this process late in my career. I hope to uncover if the teachers in this study have actively engaged in this process at a much earlier stage in their journeys as teachers than I did.

To ignore where we come from would be dishonest. Similarly, we must respect and honour the backgrounds that each of our students brings to the classroom. When teachers come from a background and set of experiences that are different from those of the students they face it can be problematic. Burstein and Cabello (1989) said, "Given differences in cultural orientations, then, teachers' educational practices may be well intentioned but may be inappropriate and even detrimental to the academic and socio-emotional development of their culturally diverse students" (p. 10).

There does exist a multiplicity of issues for teachers as they enter a classroom and a community. First of all a teacher needs to be prepared to assume the duties of a classroom teacher. Secondly, they need to be adequately prepared to live in an environment and with people new to them. Finally, they need to be aware of their own biases so that they might avoid letting

them dominate their thinking and actions. In simple terms a teacher needs to be prepared to deal effectively with both the formal curriculum and the culture of the school. This is certainly a delicate balance that needs to be maintained. The combination of these factors will contribute greatly to teacher satisfaction and ultimately have a positive impact on teacher retention rates.

How then does a beginning teacher manage to cope with all of the demands that are going to be placed on their plate once they enter the classroom? Certainly, on the basis of their teacher education, these young teachers are well prepared for the demands of teaching. But are they being adequately prepared to meet the myriad of other challenges that they will face? Their ability to meet all of these demands will then go a long way to determine their effectiveness as a teacher.

Most Independent First Nations schools teach their respective provincial curriculum. Saskatchewan is no exception. It doesn't matter if a school is a provincial school or a band controlled school, the formal curriculum of instruction is the curriculum approved by the Ministry of Education if students are to get a recognized credit.

There is however, another curriculum that includes a set of norms and expectations that exist which the student and teacher must understand, accept and master if they wish to be successful in school. As Jackson (1968) stated, "the crowds, the praise, and the power that combine to give a distinctive flavor to classroom life collectively form a hidden curriculum which each student (and teacher) must master if he is to make his way satisfactorily through the school" (p. 33-34). I am also interested in exploring how non-Aboriginal teachers deal with this hidden curriculum of norms and expectations. This is an interesting dynamic that needs to be addressed because the hidden curriculum is a very important concept within the context of Aboriginal Education.

## **Chapter 2** **Reviewing the Literature**

Harper (2000) made a bold statement with the title of her article, “*There Is No Way to Prepare for This: Teaching in First Nations Schools in Northern Ontario.*” After reading the article I began to wonder if this statement was true. I knew from my own experience that I was somewhat prepared to teach on a Reserve in Northern Saskatchewan. If I felt that way then maybe others did as well. It could be through examining their stories that we identify the means by which teachers can be prepared to be effective teachers of Aboriginal students not only in isolated northern communities but in urban school settings as well.

Harper (2000) addressed many of these issues in her study conducted in isolated northern Ontario Aboriginal communities:

This article reports on a qualitative study of female teachers working in two remote First Nations communities in Northern Ontario. The study explored the professional and personal experiences of 10 women and how their experiences speak to current teacher pre-service and in-service education. This study is part of a larger research project that investigates the historical and contemporary circumstances of white and Aboriginal women teaching in northern Canada and their role in and preparation for minority and multi-cultural education. (p. 144)

As I perused the literature and connected it with my own experiences, several issues began to emerge that I knew needed further exploration to really come to some sense of where education is at in preparing teachers to work effectively with Aboriginal students. These issues include: Social Justice; Teaching for Diversity and Teacher Preparation; Aboriginal Education; and Teacher Effectiveness.

## **Teacher Preparation and Teacher Development**

I began my post-secondary training in 1978 and completed my B.Ed. in 1982; yet, I am still travelling along a path of both formal and informal education. Along with completing a second Bachelors' degree and beginning graduate studies, I have been actively involved in other learning activities, some of which have been to pursue personal interests and others as part of professional development. I understand and encourage the ideal of lifelong learning. Inherent in that learning is the opportunity for growth. If our goal from learning is to achieve new results then we must somehow apply new methods, or we will continue to obtain the same results and no growth will be experienced.

In order to reflect the needs and demands of a changing society, both teaching methodologies and classroom dynamics must undergo change. Driving this change has always been the role of the classroom teacher. This puts expectations on both the practicing teacher and those who are in university programs. The demands on teachers to deal with a multicultural and multiracial classroom are not a 21<sup>st</sup> Century phenomena. As Mallea and Young (1983) explain:

Two fundamental assumptions which underlie our thinking on the subject of teacher education need to be emphasized. First, we believe that teacher education has to be a career-long process of professional development in which academic studies, pre-service training, induction, and subsequent in-service work are considered separate but indispensable parts of the process. Secondly, we believe that Canada is a multicultural society and that teacher education programs need to prepare all of our teachers with this in mind. Therefore, to argue that certain teachers who have certain specializations, or who intend to teach in certain areas, will never interact with children from a variety of cultural backgrounds, is to miss the point: all teachers need to prepare themselves and

their students for life in a multi-ethnic, multiracial Canada. (p. 402)

A common goal in teacher preparation is to allow preservice teachers the opportunity to develop the skills and awareness to combat inequality in schools (Brown, 2004; Lallas & Valle, 2007; McDonald, 2005; Medina, Morrone and Anderson, 2005; Moule, 2005; Quartz and Oakes, 2003; Reed, 2009). According to Johnson (2007):

Social justice is ubiquitous within teacher education: One would be hard pressed to find a teacher education program that does not advertise social justice as one of its goals. Despite such attention, few studies have focused on how pre-service teachers have come to understand what teaching for equity and social justice means. (p. 299)

The inclusion of teaching for social justice requires a change in pedagogical perspective. It is a holistic approach that challenges the traditional values and methodologies that have long dominated our North American educational systems.

This is not a new phenomenon in education. Tyler (1949) stated “objectives, then, represent the kind of changes in behaviour that an educational institution seeks to bring about in its students” (p. 6). There is often a gap between where the student actually is and where we might expect them to be. Tyler (1949) provided an explanation for this gap:

Studies of the learner suggest educational objectives only when the information about the learner is compared with some desirable standards, some conception of acceptable norms, so that the difference between the present condition of the learner and the acceptable norm can be identified. This difference or gap is what is generally referred to as a need. (p. 6)

Tyler’s work created a structure for establishing and evaluating both instruction and curriculum that has influenced classrooms throughout North America for more than 50 years and continues

to do so today. Tyler (1949) identified a four-part process for establishing instruction and curriculum:

1. What educational purposes should the school seek to attain?
2. How can learning experiences be selected which are likely to be useful in attaining these objectives?
3. How can learning experiences be organized for effective instruction?
4. How can the effectiveness of learning experiences be evaluated? (p. 1)

While these recommendations by Tyler provide a foundation, they do not recognize the unique needs of many students, particularly First Nations and Aboriginal students. Further, Tyler stated “another point of confusion in interpreting data about the learner is the failure to distinguish between the needs that are appropriately met by the education and needs that are properly met through other social agencies” (p. 15). Thus we have an educational system that is based on establishing objectives and evaluating them in order to fill identified gaps or needs. Unfortunately, this system has failed to recognize the unique history, life experiences, and needs of First Nations and Aboriginal students that are present in today’s classroom.

Teaching for Social Justice encourages teachers to recognize and combat inequalities that occur in the classroom and the school and beyond. Two aspects of social justice education that are essential when studying marginalized people are culturally relevant pedagogy and anti-racist pedagogy.

Culturally relevant pedagogy is often referred to as Culturally Responsive Teaching (CRT). Gay and Kirkland (2003) discuss the need for cultural awareness:

culturally responsive teaching (CRT) for ethnically diverse students should be a



fundamental feature of teacher preparation and classroom practice. CRT involves using cultures, experiences, and perspectives of African, Native, Latino, and Asian American students as filters through which to teach them academic knowledge and skills (p. 181).

In their analysis, Gay and Kirkland (2003) stated that, “teachers knowing who they are as people, understanding the contexts in which they teach, and questioning their knowledge and assumptions are as important as the mastery of techniques for instructional effectiveness” (p. 181).

While studying the education of African American students, Ladson-Billings (1994) provided the background to culturally responsive teaching when she introduced the concept of culturally relevant teaching: “Specifically, culturally relevant teaching is a pedagogy that empowers students intellectually, socially, emotionally, and politically by using cultural referents to impart knowledge, skills and attitudes” (p. 17-18).

In order to ensure that culturally relevant and responsive teaching is found in schools, beginning teachers need to be adequately exposed to its purpose and rationale. There is a growing demand within teacher education and professional development to look within in order to facilitate growth. This process of self-reflection cannot begin once a teacher has left university and entered the profession. Rather, it needs to begin much earlier in the journey. This process will also force teachers to challenge the cultural and racial biases that they bring with them. If these attitudes and values are not recognized then they will become hurdles that will prevent the teacher from authentically connecting with those students whose background is different from their own (Gay & Kirkland, 2003; Gere, Buehler, Dallavis & Haviland, 2009; Hesch, 1999; McDonald, 2007; Sleeter, 2001). Clearly we cannot truly have a sense of where we are going if

we don't have a thorough and critical understanding of where we have been. A thorough understanding of our own history will allow us to legitimize and recognize the students in our classroom who are different and not be blinded by colour (Cochrane-Smith, 1995; Cooper, 2003; Glazer, 2003; Johnson, A., 2007: and, Johnson, L., 2002).

It is the responsibility of teacher education programs to prepare beginning teachers to meet the technical demands of being a classroom teacher. It is also imperative that teacher education programs are updated to ensure that they are current and that they reflect the needs of today's classrooms. Today's educators must be prepared to teach for the diversity that will be found in their classrooms. They must be prepared to deal with a multitude of social justice issues and they must incorporate a holistic approach to teaching. Gone are the days where it was acceptable to teach using a one-dimensional, authoritarian pedagogical approach with a hidden curriculum of assimilation. Freire (1989) stated:

The pedagogy of the oppressed, as a humanist and liberating pedagogy, has two stages. In the first, the oppressed unveil the world of oppression and through praxis commit themselves to its transformation. In the second stage, in which the reality of oppression has already been transformed, this pedagogy ceases to belong to the oppressed and becomes a pedagogy of all men in the process of permanent liberation. (p. 40)

This dehumanization, verging on automation of students, is modeled by 'Ditto' in the movie *Teachers* (1984). On the other hand, teaching in today's classroom does not require that teachers jump on their desks and extol their students to 'Seize the Day,' as Robin Williams' character does in the movie *Dead Poets Society* (1989). There is a happy medium that teachers must strive to attain and it is found by teachers who behave in their classrooms as decent human beings. They strive to establish authentic relationships with the children based on kindness. They

will make an effort to get to know their students, but equally important they will allow the students the opportunity to get to know them. Reeves (2006) discusses this concept: “The latest 21st-century curriculum with poor implementation doesn’t stand a chance, while the 19th-century classic, *McGuffey’s Reader*, will succeed in the hands of a talented and thoughtful teacher” (p. 78-79). Good teaching will overcome the limitations of poor resources but poor teaching will not allow effective use of any resource.

There is a growing awareness among university teacher preparation programs that changes are needed (Cochran-Smith, 1995; Cole 1999; Lund, 1998; Myers, 2004). Specifically, teacher preparation programs need to explicitly prepare beginning teachers to be culturally responsive and aware of the diversity in their classrooms (Davis & Cabello, 1989; Jennings, 1995; Ladson-Billings, 2000; Medina, Morrone & Anderson, 2005; McKenzie and Scheurich, 2004; Nieto, 2000; Seidle, 2009; Sleeter, 2001).

The challenge for teacher educators and teacher education programs is to prepare beginning teachers with the knowledge, skills and experiences to be able to deal with the changing dynamics in today’s schools. The findings of this study will add to the limited body of knowledge for the preparation of non-Aboriginal teachers to teach Aboriginal students particularly in a Saskatchewan context.

Villegas and Lucas (2002) identified six characteristics that are needed to allow teachers the opportunity to work effectively with diverse students in their classroom:

- (a) is socioculturally conscious, that is, recognizes that there are multiple ways of perceiving reality and that these ways are influenced by one’s location in the social order;
- (b) has affirming views of students from diverse backgrounds, seeing resources

for learning in all students rather than viewing differences as problems to overcome. (c) sees himself or herself as both responsible for and capable of bringing about educational change that will make schools more responsive to all students; (d) understands how learners construct knowledge and is capable of promoting learners' knowledge construction; (e) know about the lives of his or her students; and (f) uses his or her knowledge about students' lives to design instruction that builds on what they already know while stretching them beyond the familiar. (p. 21)

Clearly, if these are critical characteristics that will go along way to determining a teacher's effectiveness, then all teachers who work with Aboriginal students should be aware of and working towards becoming proficient at them.

I am a product of an established teacher education program and have been a practicing professional for many years. I do have a number of biases and opinions that were developed throughout my formative years. For example; my parents, who grew up in Winnipeg, did not allow me to wear a hat in the house. When asked why, I was told that 'only Jewish boys wear hats inside.' I may wear a hat inside today, but I'm always a little uncomfortable with it. As a youth I thought all kids should have what I had, a family, a home, friends. I can't honestly say how I felt about minority groups since we really didn't have any. The community that I was raised in was very homogeneous. It was a middle class suburban neighborhood and made up of predominantly white families. There was some diversity in this grouping, but most of the families were from either Western or Eastern Europe. I know that I had some classmates who were Asian, African American, or Aboriginal, but there numbers were very small. In our high school graduating class of about 350 students I would guess the percentage of non-white would be less than 1%. It is easy to see how systemic attitudes of White Privilege could grow and

prosper in this type of environment. I also benefited from a home environment where reading, thinking, and learning about many topics was encouraged. I believe that all of these influences have allowed me to challenge these attitudes of White Privilege that remain.

Who I am today is the result of this growth and evolution in both my professional and personal life. It is just this type of change and maturity that I would hope and expect any institution would inspire, but particularly an institution that prepares teachers for the demands of the classroom. Sleeter (2001) explains:

Attempts to rework whole teacher education programs, whether by collaborating with schools, infusing multicultural course content, or both, might improve the preparation of teachers. There are too few data, however, to know how well teachers in such programs learn to teach in culturally diverse schools. (p. 101)

These statements articulate the need for more research on this topic.

Things began to crystallize for me when I came across and reviewed a particular thesis. Harder (2004) states:

The research describes the experience of a southern white teacher who lived and worked in a remote community in Canada's Far North. The impact of physical relocation and culture shock are discussed, as well as problems encountered when conflicting views of education and life goals meet in a cross-cultural setting. The thesis explores some of the difficulties facing mainstream teachers of Indigenous students when issues of past colonialism and present injustices come into play. (p. iii)

Although I had not worked in Canada's Far North, I did have a similar experience to what is described in Harder's work. I spent four years living and teaching in a reserve Community in Northern Saskatchewan. I did not leave my family behind, but rather, over the course of time all

the members of my immediate family joined me, and we were able to experience the adventure together.

It was during my time in the North that I became acutely aware of the reality of oppression, racism and many other social issues facing Aboriginal students. This first hand experience forced me to explore the anti-racist aspect of teaching for social-justice as found in the history and current practices of Aboriginal education in Canada.

### **Aboriginal Education**

The need for anti-racist education and awareness is imperative for both pre-service and in-service teachers who teach in modern classrooms. The education of Aboriginal children has been dominated by racist practices throughout Canadian history. Only by breaking down preconceived myths and attitudes towards these students will they be given an authentic opportunity for success.

According to Wikipedia (2008), “racism is a belief or ideology that all members of each racial group possess characteristics or abilities specific to that race, especially to distinguish it as being either superior or inferior to another racial group or racial groups”. The Canadian example, through the treatment of Aboriginal people, was a practice of Institutional Racism. Wikipedia (2011) defines this form of racism as “the existence of institutional systemic policies and practices meant to place non-white racial and ethnic groups at a disadvantage in relation to the institution’s white members”.

The history of Aboriginal education in Canada has been influenced by two myths. The first is that Aboriginal students are less capable than white-students; the second is that Aboriginal people, along with their culture and language, were inferior to Anglo-Canadians (Antone, 2003; Battiste, 2013; Carr-Stewart, 2001; Chisholm, 1994; Goulet, 2001; St. Denis, 2007).

This first myth parallels that of the attitude towards Black students in America. Ladson-Billings (1994), explained this phenomena:

The usual antidote for this persistent view of African American children is for the viewer to pretend that he or she does not see the color that once forced their ancestors into slavery. Thus the teacher claims to be color-blind. However, such claims cannot be valid. Given the significance of race and color in American society, it is impossible to believe that a classroom teacher does not notice the race and ethnicity of the children she is teaching. Further, by claiming not to notice, the teacher is saying that she is dismissing one of the most salient features of the child's identity and that she does not account for it in her curricular planning and instruction. Saying we are aware of students' race and ethnic background is not the same as saying we treat students inequitably. The passion for equality in American ethos has many teachers (and others) equating equality with sameness. (p. 32-33)

Unfortunately, most teachers are not encouraged to engage in a process of self-reflection and discovery which would allow them to prevent themselves from being colorblind when it comes to the racial make-up of the students in their class. Ladson-Billings (1994) provides an example to explain why it is crucial that teachers recognize the diversity and differences in their students:

In a classroom of thirty children a teacher has one student who is visually impaired, one who is wheelchair-bound [physically challenged], one who has limited English proficiency, and one who is intellectually gifted. If the teacher presents identical work in identical ways to all of the students, is she dealing equitably or inequitably with the children? The visually impaired student cannot read the small print on an assignment,

the wheelchair-bound student [the physically challenged student] cannot do push-ups in gym, the foreign-language student cannot give an oral report in English, and the intellectually gifted student learns nothing by spelling words she mastered several years ago.

The notion of equity as sameness only makes sense when all students are exactly the same. But even within the nuclear family children born from the same parents are not exactly the same. Different children have different needs and addressing those different needs is the best way to deal with them equitably. The same is true in the classroom. If teachers pretend not to see the students' racial and ethnic differences, they really do not see the students at all and are limited in their ability to meet their educational needs. (p. 32-33)

Until this myth of sameness is completely eradicated, there will always be condescending attitudes towards students who are different from the mainstream, keeping them on the margins and forcing them to struggle in order to gain success.

I have spent many years teaching Aboriginal students and have also taught classes made up of primarily white middle class students. In each classroom, I had students of mixed ability. In order to enhance the opportunity for them to succeed I needed to adjust my instructional practices, use appropriate materials and resources, and evaluate in an equitable fashion.

In order to comprehend the complexities involved in Aboriginal education it is necessary to consider the current situation from a historical perspective and expose another myth, perhaps the most debilitating of all for Aboriginal students. Aboriginals, as a people, were not seen as legitimate Canadians and in order to become 'true' Canadians attempts were made to force them to adopt a Euro-centric (British) model of being a Canadian. This form of institutional racism has



often manifested itself in a patronizing attitude towards Aboriginal peoples throughout Canadian history (Antone, 2003; Battiste, 2013; Carr-Stewart, 2001; Chisholm, 1994; Goulet, 2001; St. Denis, 2007).

There is no question that after the signing of the numbered treaties there was a conscious movement by the government of Canada, and many organizations throughout the Dominion that represented the Canadian government, towards the assimilation of the Aboriginal people into the 'white' European-based Canadian society. The worst aspects of this ideology were seen in the 'Residential School System' and the attempt to deny and eliminate Aboriginal language and culture (Antone, 2003; Battiste, 2013; Carr-Stewart, 2001; Chisholm, 1994).

This crisis within First Nation Education came to a head with the presentation in 1969 of the Statement of the Government of Canada, Indian Policy. This paper is more commonly referred to as The White Paper. This report recommended that in order to become true Canadian citizens in the "Just Society," changes were needed. The uniqueness and place of the Aboriginal people, a special status that was guaranteed in the Treaties, must be removed. This is an interesting ideal, one that obviously came from a position of dominance and cultural insensitivity. The reaction to The White Paper was swift among the Aboriginal people in Canada. The greatest impact on Education was a paper presented by the National Indian Brotherhood, *Indian Control of Indian Education* (1972). The ideas presented in this report were influential and powerful. The result was a reversal in attitude, and an acceptance, at least on paper, of the entrenched right to Education of First Nations people, by the Government of Canada.

In the course of the past 30 years, there are many First Nations who have gained partial control of the education of their children. Although the formal policy towards First Nations Education has changed, the shackles of control around Aboriginal Education by the dominant,

assimilationist, Euro-centric, Imperialist and white-dominated Canada remain firmly in place.

Saunders and Hill (2007) echoed the thoughts of Freire when they stated:

First Nations education continues to be affected by outside influences such as federal fiscal management and divisions between provincial and federal ministries. In turn these influences propagate ongoing political struggles against oppression and second-class citizenship instead of towards self-determination, autonomy, and sovereignty. (p. 1016)

In many schools there is a hidden curriculum that perpetuates the myths and stereotypes that Aboriginal students are inferior to non-Aboriginal students. Not only is it necessary for Aboriginal people to continue to strive towards breaking the shackles of oppression, those non-Aboriginal players in education must also face their own biases and beliefs in order to work towards similar goals. Howard (1999) provides a vivid comparison when he discusses the treatment of Black Americans when he explained this reality:

While many of my white colleagues have worked hard to address and breakdown these barriers of dominance we have never looked into the eyes of the snake of white dominance and when invited to do so, feel blamed rather than enlightened. And even those of us who have tried to stare down that viper are often uncomfortable with the reflection of ourselves that we discover there, and we shy away from further confrontations or deeper learning. (p. 27)

How is it possible to continue to expect or is it even attainable to continue to expect Aboriginal students to succeed when the system itself has been set up to ensure that they cannot succeed unless they are prepared to abandon their language and cultural heritage? In many ways we are all victims of the hegemonic nature of dominant forces. It is particularly disconcerting

when these forces are hidden. Perhaps, through the adoption of culturally relevant and appropriate methodologies by caring teachers, these barriers to student success can be overcome. This study will add to this effort.

The challenges presented to us when we begin to reshape our entrenched cultural values and beliefs range from alienation to indifference. Yet, in order to truly come to grips with the reality of dominance and the systemic racism that is found in our Euro-centric, assimilationist educational system we must be willing to take the risk. Howard (1999) said:

The rhetoric of blame and guilt often pushes our White students and colleagues into the stage of perpetual reintegration, locking them into resistance and self-protection rather than responsible reflection. If we want to engage the issues of White dominance and racism in a compelling way, then we must allow for open dialogue and the possibility of change. We must learn to use the language of discovery and exploration, rather than the rhetoric of blame and projection. We must continually invite our White colleagues to see the potential for their role as allies in the work of social healing. (p.110)

There have been many studies done on the topic of Aboriginal Education from the perspective of the Aboriginal person. These studies reflect the reality that Aboriginal Education is a very diverse topic (Agbo, 2004; Battiste, 1998; Battiste, 2013; Kitchen, Lorenzo, Cherebunin, Trudeau & Hudson, 2009; Mahan, 1984; McPhie, 1995; Pewewardy, 2002; Reyhner, 2002; Stackowski, 2002). This study will focus on the teachers of Aboriginal students, particularly those whose racial, ethnic and cultural backgrounds differ from those of their Aboriginal students.

The student population in American schools, as well as in many Canadian schools, is diverse. The majority of the literature that deals with cultural diversity focuses on white teachers,

generally female, teaching in culturally diverse classrooms populated with a majority of black, Hispanic and Asian students. Burstein and Cabello (1989) explain the trend in American schools population:

The student population in the United States is more racially and ethnically diverse than in any previous generation in American history. For example, in California, the minority population, which made up only 27% of all public school enrolment in 1970, increased to 42% in 1980 and 50.8% by 1988. This population has increased most rapidly in urban areas where the minority population is fast becoming the majority. In Los Angeles, for example, elementary students in 1988-89 were only 13.4% White; and remaining elementary students were from various ethnic backgrounds including 63.2% Hispanic, 16% Black, 5% Asian, and 2.4% American Indian, Pacific Islander, and others. (p. 9)

Burstein and Cabello (1989) explained the changing trend in the teaching force: “The teaching profession is overwhelmingly white (89.7% in 1986), and its percentage of minority teachers has declined significantly over the last decade” (p. 9).

I recognize that the vast majority of those entering teachers’ education, whether they are in the United States or Canada, are predominately white, middle class females (McCall, 1995; Ukpokodu, 2002). Although by and large the teacher force remains predominantly white and female we are experiencing an increasing level of diversity within the classroom.

One of the means to close this diversity gap is to establish positive relationships with the students. A positive relationship is vital to success. However, in order for genuine understanding and relationships to be forged the teacher needs to come to grips with their own biases and beliefs.

When I began working intensively with Aboriginal students I was basically naïve about their educational system and its history. I may have made a few errors in judgment but being honest with the members of the community about my lack of knowledge was important in dealing with them. It was also essential that I showed respect and a willingness to learn but not to judge students for having a different cultural background than mine.

I have become aware of the importance of respecting Aboriginal ways of knowing. Warner (2006) explained:

Native Ways of Knowing, in contrast to Western Education practices, are acquired and represented through the context of place, revolving around the needs of a community and the best efforts to actualize a holistic understanding of the community's environment.

Native ways of knowing use an Indigenous research lens to study and interact in the world. Western educational practices dissect and disconnect knowledge, whereas Native Ways of Knowing presume a holistic context. The primary difference between the two lies in the emphasis of Native Ways of Knowing on knowing as a verb and Western educational practices that emphasize the accumulation of knowledge, a noun. (p. 149-150)

Doige (2003) further explained this difference: "The Aboriginal approaches to learning are spiritual, holistic, experiential/subjective, and transformative. In contrast, mainstream approaches to learning are secular, fragmented, neutral/objective, and seek to discover definitive truth" (p. 147). This disconnect that Aboriginal students feel with school and education is in large part due to the loss of language and culture (Kitchen, Lorenzo, Cherebunin, Trudeau & Hudson, 2009; Gravelin, 2002; Kirkness, 1998; Goodard & Foster, 2002; St. Dennis, 2007).

It also struck me that I needed to address a very important question if I was going to experience any degree of success and satisfaction with the changing demands that I was facing in

my classroom. Do I believe that these Aboriginal students are capable of being successful students? I honestly believe that they are worth the time and effort. I'm not really sure if all teachers share this sentiment. I hope to explore common themes in the stories of non-Aboriginal teachers who consider themselves effective educators of Aboriginal students. Aboriginal students have many internal and external barriers to their success, but with the support of caring, responsive and effective teachers they can be successful (Goulet, 2001; Hampton, 2002; Leavitt, 1994; Wotherspoon, 2007). Aboriginal students may encounter a variety of struggles and conflicts within the classroom setting. Goulet (2001) discussed this:

Social struggles are enacted in classroom practice where Aboriginal students can encounter an ethnocentric curriculum, authoritative relationships, racist attitudes, and prejudicial beliefs about their inferiority or deficits. Conditions such as these are intolerable for Aboriginal children, who are made to feel stupid when they cannot learn under these circumstances and fail in school. Some resist the oppression and so do not participate and drop out of school. Others, despite the obstacles, do succeed and even excel in school, maybe because they have [effective teachers]. (p. 68)

I have taught all of the subjects that have or have had Provincial Examinations. These are grade 12 classes and include Chemistry, Biology, Physics, English Language Arts, and Mathematics. I taught these subjects in a K-12 school in rural-central Saskatchewan where the majority of the students were white and could be classified as middle to upper-middle class. I then taught in an isolated northern community where the overwhelming majority of the students were Aboriginal. Clearly the dynamics of the school, community, and students were polar opposites. I only had two students fail any of these courses; interestingly enough, both of these students were in the

southern community. This crystallized in my mind the idea that given the right situation, motivation, and opportunity Aboriginal students could be highly successful.

When I hear teachers complain about their students' lack of progress, or the insurmountable obstacles that they have to face, I always wonder how these teachers would answer the question about whether or not their students are capable. Perhaps these teachers have bought into Convenient Myths of Mediocrity. Reeves (2006) stated, "Convenient myths provide an abdication of responsibility" (p. 91). If we are going to breakdown the myths found in Aboriginal education then we must take Reeves' (2006) advice and not replace one myth with another, "Challenging mythology entails not an alternative myth but evidence and credible examples from the lives of teachers and leaders" (p. 94).

### **Teacher Effectiveness**

What is effectiveness? According to Walker (2008) "effective teachers share at least twelve clear characteristics" (p. 61). These twelve characteristics include being prepared, a positive attitude, holding high expectations, being creative, being fair, displaying a personal touch, cultivating a sense of belonging, being compassionate, having a sense of humour, respecting students, forgiving, and being able to admit mistakes (p. 64-67).

These findings were echoed by Walls, Nardi, von Minden and Hoffman (2002) who found: that prospective teachers, novice teachers, and experienced teachers have almost identical perceptions. They know what effective teachers do and what ineffective teachers do. All of the participants had strong views about what constitutes good teachers versus bad teachers, and the two are by no means mirror images of one another. More verb-referent statements about emotional climate, care about students, interaction with students, learning activities, discussion, and teacher or student

questions were reported for effective teachers than for ineffective teachers. Further, there was evidence of more focus on tests, feedback, grades, assignments, and homework when participants described their worst teachers. (p. 46-47)

Good teaching is good teaching. Regardless of whether we use the more popular term of effective practices the key is to establish authentic relationships with the students and an awareness of their backgrounds. This includes their school experiences but more importantly a more holistic awareness of the students' personal backgrounds and histories.

Goulet (2001) identifies several characteristics of effective practices for teaching Aboriginal students:

Effective teachers bring the language and culture of their Aboriginal students into the classroom to enhance learning (Deyhle & Swisher, 1997). They learn about the community (Noordhoff & Kleinfeld, 1993), are aware of cultural differences (Deyhle & Swisher), and acquaint themselves with culturally appropriate methodologies and resource materials (Farrell-Racette, Goulet, Pelletier & Shmon, 1996). Teachers recognize that culture is dynamic and changing, so they incorporate both traditional and contemporary culture in the curriculum (Farrell-Racette et al.; Lipka et al.; Miler Cleary & Peacock, 1998; Pewewardy, 1999). Elders help to transform lived curriculum for use in the classroom and school (Lipka et al., 1998; Tompkins, 1998). Students are seen as assets and their cultural background as strengths (Deyhle & Swisher, 1997; Pewewardy, 1999).

Effective teachers prepare students for life in the modern world without loss of their original culture (Pewewardy, 1999; Tompkins, 1998). (p. 71)



In order to provide the opportunity for student success, effective teachers must be sensitive to the social challenges facing many Aboriginal students but they do not allow this to be an excuse for poor performance. Goulet (2001) explained this:

Attending to issues of poverty and dysfunction in the community does not mean thinking less of the students or their families. It means that the teacher adjusts her teaching and expectations for engagement and participation because she is aware of how the social stresses are affecting the child. (p. 77)

The literature clearly shows that there are best practices to determine effective teaching. There is also a clear correlation between these best practices and specific practices for effective teaching of Aboriginal students. A question that needs answering is, “Do the current practices of the teachers in this study reflect those identified by Goulet?” I know from my own experience that there is no substitute for a humanistic approach to teaching. Children need to know that the teacher cares about them and is willing to show that they believe the children are worth their best efforts. This philosophy transcends racial and cultural boundaries. Goulet (2001) summarized this ideal:

As teachers we need to connect with our students, recognizing that each student is a part of a family and community – a community with a history. We need to connect with families and communities in order to affirm, value, and include the language, cultural practices, and knowledge of the people in a meaningful way, in partnership, in order to overcome the past colonial practices in schooling. At the same time, we need to pay attention to the present realities of the communities where we teach and live. We have a responsibility to participate in the struggle against the continuing effects of oppression, because effective teaching practice takes place in relationship

with the teacher, student, family, school, community, as well as the broader society, keeping in mind that all of us are situated in, and affected by, the complex historical contexts of culture, race, and class. (p. 80)

Clearly then there is a uniqueness in Aboriginal education that teachers must respect in order to be effective. Goulet (2001) noted, “effective Aboriginal education addresses issues of culture and language, community values and norms, and power relations. In addition to the above areas, effective Aboriginal education also needs to include the impact of historical and ongoing oppression of Aboriginal peoples” (p. 70).

The challenge presented is to move from an understanding of teacher preparation for social justice, Aboriginal education and effective teaching to methodology that would allow me to explore the issue of non-Aboriginal teachers’ perceptions of their level of preparation to be effective teachers of Aboriginal students.

## **Chapter 3**

### **Research Design and Methodology**

#### **The Background**

Life often presents opportunities where we might least expect them. After many years of teaching and living in rural Saskatchewan I did not think that I would be presented with the opportunity to teach and live in a northern reserve community. I was “Re-structured” out of my job with a Regional College and faced the prospect of a long period of unemployment. So, I decided to accept the first offer that came along, a position at a First Nations school in a Northern Reserve Community. What I thought would be a one-year individual opportunity turned out to be a four-year family adventure. It is fair to say that this was a life altering experience for all of us. I’m also convinced that had other opportunities not come about we might well have remained living and working there. However, my children had graduated from high school and moved on to university, and I was offered an administrative position in another community. So, my educational journey continued along another path.

Over the course of the past 14 years I have been working primarily with Aboriginal students. In that time my interests began to focus on both Aboriginal education and teacher effectiveness. While this was very much a positive time, there were many obstacles and challenges that had to be overcome. I began to wonder if other non-Aboriginal, white, middle class, and urban educated teachers shared similar experiences. I believe I was prepared for the technical aspects of teaching when I left university with my degree and teaching certificate in hand. But, was I really prepared to meet the challenges of being an effective teacher for the students who make up the classroom community? I had the advantage of several years to gain experience and develop into an effective teacher in an environment in which I was comfortable. Dewey (1938) defined this phenomenon as continuity: “the principle of continuity of experience

means that every experience both takes something from those which have gone before and modifies in some way the quality of those which come after” (p. 27). When I went to live and teach in an isolated northern Aboriginal community, I already possessed the skills of an effective teacher. I began to question then how are teachers whose first teaching assignment is on an isolated northern reserve community going to be able to develop into effective teachers when they faced many obstacles?

After moving from the North I spent three years living and teaching in an urban community in Saskatchewan. The school was in a low socio-economic neighbourhood and served a predominantly Aboriginal student population. I was enjoying this teaching experience and the feedback that I received indicated that I was being effective. Intuitively I knew this, but I was not clear about why, and I really was not sure about the pedagogical perspectives which I held that might be allowing me to be effective. As well, I began to wonder how I got to this point. In particular, what aspects of my training, if any, had prepared me to be an effective teacher of Aboriginal students? This study was an opportunity to explore the stories of a number of teachers who shared similar experiences working with Aboriginal students and their efforts to do so in an effective manner.

## **Research Design**

### **Research questions:**

1. What do four non-Aboriginal teachers with over five years experience working with Aboriginal students describe as qualities of effective teaching in this context?
2. What are some of the major social justice issues that teachers need to address in order to be both successful and effective when working with Aboriginal students?

This study will not be confined to merely looking at working with Aboriginal students in isolated, northern, communities, but will examine the issues teachers face in an urban school as well. The focus will be on determining if there are key indicators that will allow teachers, new or experienced, to work effectively and experience success with any Aboriginal student regardless of where the classroom is located.

### **Methodology.**

Teaching is both a personal and a social activity. It only seems natural that the stories of our experiences involve personal and social themes, as well. Clandinin and Huber (2002) addressed this phenomena: “Teachers’ stories, their narratives of experience, are both personal – reflecting teachers’ life histories – and social – reflecting the milieu, the contexts in which teachers live” (p. 161). According to Connelly and Clandinin (1990) “The main claim for the use of narrative in educational research is that humans are storytelling organisms who, individually and socially, lead storied lives. The study of narrative, therefore, is the study of the ways humans experience the world” (p. 1).

Closely related to an understanding of the stories is the relationship between our many life experiences. Dewey (1938) explained the power of experience:

We always live at the time we live and not at some other time, and only by extracting at each present time the full meaning of each present experience are we preparing for doing the same thing in the future. This is the only preparation which in the long run amounts to anything. (p. 51)

Experience does not take place in a vacuum. In education experience involves the interaction of people, but also, according to Dewey (1938):

An experience is always what it is because of a transaction taking place between an individual and what, at the time, constitutes his environment... The environment, in other words, is whatever conditions interact with personal needs, desires, purposes, and capacities to create experience which is had. (p. 41-42)

Quite often the most difficult step on the journey is the first one. Getting things going can often prove to be challenging. I knew that I wanted to pursue a qualitative study so I spent some time exploring both Narrative Inquiry and Life History as workable methodologies. I fully understood that I had a strong need to allow the stories to be told, particularly my own experience of teaching and living in both a Northern Reserve Community and a more Southern Urban Community. After much discussion and reflection although I was drawn to elements of both Narrative Inquiry and Life History I realized that I did not have the experience and expertise to pursue a study using either of these methodologies exclusively. What I did have, as it was pointed out to me, was the makings of a qualitative case study. Stake (1995) says, "A case study is expected to catch the complexity of a single case" (p. xi), and further explains, "Case study is the study of the particularity and complexity of a single case, coming to understand its activity within important circumstances" (p. xi). So, I embarked on a Case Study with four participants whose stories are conceptualized within a framework related to my experience working with Aboriginal students (Samaras and Reese, 2009).

Qualitative Case Study research is subjective and I believe this methodology allowed me to focus on the people, their situation, the environment and their stories, which make up this case. Stake (1995) explains, "Qualitative research tries to establish an empathetic understanding for the reader, through description, sometimes thick description, conveying to the reader what experience itself would convey" (p. 39).

I explored this idea and realized that a Case Study approach would allow me to use some elements of both Narrative Inquiry and Life History as well as the opportunity to be an active participant in the research. The role of the researcher is explained by Stake (1995): “Standard qualitative designs call for the persons most responsible for interpretations to be in the field, making observations, exercising subjective judgment, analyzing and synthesizing, all the while realizing their own consciousness” (p. 41). Stake (1995) explained the role of experience:

One of the principal qualifications of qualitative research is experience. Added to the experience of ordinary looking and thinking, the experience of the qualitative researcher is one of knowing what leads to significant understanding, recognizing good sources of data, and consciously and unconsciously testing out the veracity of their eyes and robustness of their interpretations. (p. 45)

Taking into consideration my experience and expertise I believed I was well suited to undergo this research journey.

Connelly and Clandinin (1990) stated:

The study of narrative, therefore, is the study of the ways humans experience the world. This general notion translates into the view that education is the construction and reconstruction of personal and social stories; teachers and learners are storytellers and characters in their own and other’s stories. (p. 2)

The goal in narrative is to understand ourselves while explaining the situations that we find ourselves in. Connelly and Clandinin (1990) further explain that, “In understanding ourselves and our students educationally, we need an understanding of people with a narrative of life experiences. Life’s narratives are the context for making meaning of school situations. (p. 2)

## **The Foundation**

As I reflect on the many experiences that have brought me to where I am in my career one of them stands out. This particular story is an example of the need for teachers to be able to reflect and learn from their experiences and to develop new levels of appreciation of the fact that the young people in their care are also going through their own set of experiences.

I had been teaching for a little over four months in Dixon and had very few incidents or issues to deal with. I was becoming more and more comfortable with the school and the students with each passing day. For most of my career I had prided myself on being able to meet the students on their terms, taking them from where they were and trying to accomplish something with them. I didn't feel the need, nor want to spend the time going through cumulative files. In my immature arrogance I didn't understand that it could at times be crucial to know something about students' backgrounds. I soon came to realize then that I needed to make an authentic effort to get to know my students and to begin the process of self-reflection which would result in both my personal and professional growth.

Towards the end of my first year in Dixon an incident involving Jim, a student in grade 10, took place that left a lasting impression with me. Jim was a decent student; he put in a good effort and showed signs of being able to get through school. Yet, Jim had one problem, his tardiness. It seemed that he was always late for first period in the morning and first period after lunch. This habit was becoming a problem for some teachers who brought the issue to the attention of the principal, Fred. Added to this was the fact that both Jim's younger siblings were exhibiting the same pattern of behaviour. They were always late, just not as late as Jim.

After trying many methods to curb the behaviour, Fred finally decided that action was necessary and made arrangements for both he and Jenny, the school counselor, to make a home



visit. On the designated day, at about 9:30 a.m. they went to Jim's house to visit. As they arrived at the house, they noticed the younger kids heading off towards the school, which was only a few blocks away. Greetings were exchanged and they knocked on the door, which was answered by Jim. It was clear that Jim was busy. He explained that he had just gotten his brother and sister off to school and would be heading there shortly himself. When asked about the morning routine, Jim said that he spent every morning getting the little ones up, dressed, got them breakfast, made their lunch, and got them off to school. When asked if that was why he was always late he said yes. But before he could go to school he has to get himself ready. Jim said that his parents were home, but they were still sleeping and wouldn't be able to get up and help.

At this point Fred and Jenny left the house telling Jim to get to school as quickly as he could. It later came out that Jim went home at lunch to make sure that his parents were okay and that they had something to eat. Both parents had addiction problems and were not really able to take care of the kids or the home. This parental responsibility naturally fell to Jim, the oldest child.

While I wasn't directly involved in this particular incident I was aware of it and it caused me to reflect on my own practice. I became aware, truly aware for the first time that it was my responsibility to make an effort to try to understand the personal situations that each and every student in my care was bringing with them into the classroom everyday. I had a decision to make. I could continue to teach and act as I had always done or I could adopt a more holistic approach to dealing with my students and the realities they faced on a daily basis. In his comparison of traditional and progressive education, Dewey (1938) recognized this dilemma:

Traditional education did not have to face this problem; it could systematically dodge this responsibility. The school environment of desks, blackboards, a small schoolyard,

was supposed to suffice. There was no demand that the teacher should become intimately acquainted with the conditions of the local community, physical, historical, economics, occupational, etc., in order to utilize that as educational resources. A system of education based upon the necessary connections of education with experience must, on the contrary, if faithful to its principle, take these things constantly into account. (p. 36)

The face of education in Saskatchewan has changed such that we can no longer categorize Aboriginal students as being an invisible minority in the classroom or outliers at their reserve schools. The classroom of today is seeing more and more Aboriginal students filling the desks. These students often suffer from learning delays, a lack of support from home, and a lack of engagement in or with the school, low self-esteem and quite often low or non-existent personal expectations. In addition, they carry the weight of low societal expectations (Antone, 2003; Carr-Stewart, 2001; Chisholm, 1994; Goulet, 2001; St. Denis, 2007). Within their communities education is often seen as a threat in that it represents institutions that were often harmful and damaging to both individuals and the communities as a whole. The society outside the reserve often expresses attitudes of racial profiling which prevent aboriginal students from being given the opportunity and the motivation to be successful. Yet, in spite of these many obstacles, there is a quiet optimism within the First Nation Schools and Communities, that perhaps success may in fact be attainable (Antone, 2003; Carr-Stewart, 2001; Chisholm, 1994; Goulet, 2001; St. Denis, 2007).

Although the goal of qualitative case study research is not to find broad generalities between multiple cases, there are going to be both similarities and differences to be found. According to Stake (1995), "For the most, the cases of interest in education and social services are people and programs. Each one is similar to other persons and programs in many ways and

unique in many ways” (p. 1). Thus the focus of qualitative case study research is on a single case, which allows for detailed analysis of that case: “Qualitative researchers treat the uniqueness of individual cases and contexts as important to understanding. Particularization is an important aim, coming to know the particularity of the case” (Stake, 1995, p. 39).

### **The Participants**

The selection of participants for this study was selective in nature. As I was taking graduate classes and thinking about this study I had conversations with colleagues about our stories of working with Aboriginal students in the North and in an inner-city school. As a result I did not need to put out a call for participants. Of the four participants in this study, three I had worked with for a period of time. When I asked them about participating in this study they readily agreed. I did contact two other potential candidates and although they had initially agreed, life situations prevented them from actively participating. I was fortunate, in that a family member of one of the participants contacted me and volunteered to be a participant.

Each of the participants is a practicing teacher with over five years of experience from both rural and urban locations. The rural settings included a Reserve school in Northern Saskatchewan and small town schools in Central Saskatchewan. The urban setting included both a high school and an elementary school set in a mid-size Saskatchewan city. Having four participants in the study was very manageable and provided adequate data (Goodson and Sikes, 2001).

Unlike Harper (2000), who in her study focused on the experiences of female teachers in an isolated northern Ontario Aboriginal community, I wanted to have a different perspective. So, the participants in this study included male and female, northern and urban.

## **Data Collection**

The data was gathered through informal, semi-structured interviews which allowed me to understand and draw a more meaningful analysis than would the structured interview. The degree of interaction and the establishment of an authentic relationship between the various participants and me accomplished this. Fontana and Frey (2005) described this as “the establishment of a human-to-human relation with the respondent and the desire to understand rather than to explain” (p. 706).

These interviews themselves followed a naturalistic conversational approach. Erlandson, Harris, Skipper & Allen (1993) maintain that “The naturalistic paradigm affirms the mutual influence that researcher and respondents have on each other” (p. 15).

Each interview took place during a single session of about two hours. During the initial stage of the interview I explained the purpose of the study, obligations that I will make to ensure their anonymity and that I would be recording the interview and using the transcription as the basis for my analysis. This initial stage, which was informal in nature, was also used to establish a relationship of trust with the participant. This was important in order to maintain ethical standards. The remainder of the interview was the opportunity for the participants to tell their stories. I used a sampling of questions from the Life Histories Interview Protocol as developed by Johnson (2007), to guide the conversation during this interview. The participants were reassured that they would be given an opportunity to review the transcripts for their interview to ensure all ethic considerations have been met.

Education in general and the activities in the classroom, are primarily social. Therefore, the key to understanding the social dynamics is to build authentic relationships with the people being studied. It was imperative then that I began to build these relationships with the participants by

being open with them about what the research is all about and why I was conducting this study. They needed to be reassured that there was no hidden agenda. An effective way of doing this was to be honest with them, respect their views and opinions, and allow them the opportunity to be active in the process. Just as I in the role of researcher, was a participant, they as participants, needed to at times take on the role of researcher (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990; Goodson & Sikes, 2001; Erlandson, et al., 1993).

### **Ethical Considerations**

In order to ensure the anonymity of each of the research participants, pseudonyms were used and each of the participants was given the opportunity to select an appropriate pseudonym of their own. One of the key ethical considerations is to assure that the rights of the participants are respected. Goodson and Sikes (2001) explained, “the fundamental ethical requirement laid on all life history researchers is that informants’ rights as people, as individuals, as selves, as subjects, as autonomous beings, should, at all times, be respected” (p. 90).

All of the interviews were audio recorded and subsequently transcribed. Prior to conducting an analysis of the transcripts each participant was asked to review the transcript to confirm their accuracy. The participants were each given a copy of their interview to review for accuracy.

### **Data Analysis**

There was not a clear distinction between the data collection and the data analysis stages. Given the nature of the study these two stages occurred simultaneously. Erlandson, et al., (1993) explain, “The analysis of the data in a naturalistic inquiry begins the first day the researcher arrives at the setting. The collection and analysis of the data obtained go hand-in-hand

as theories and themes emerge during the study” (p. 111). They further explain some features of data analysis:

Data analysis in a naturalistic inquiry involves a twofold approach. The first aspect involves data analysis at the research site during data collection. The second aspect involves data analysis away from the site following a period of data collection. Note that this second aspect is conducted between site visits prior to as well as after completion of data collection. (p. 113)

There is a clear interaction between the collection of data and the analysis that might be generated. The role of the researcher, as defined by Erlandson, et al. (1993) is to consider how:

The human instrument responds to the first available data and immediately forms very tentative working hypotheses that cause adjustments in interview questions, observational strategies, and other data collection procedures. New data, obtained through refined procedures, test and reshape the tentative hypotheses that have been formed and further modify the data collection procedures. This interactive refining process never really ceases until the final report has been written.” (p. 114)

Once the interviews were completed I began the process of transcribing the conversations from audio recording to a word processor. This process took longer than I anticipated, but it did allow me the opportunity to get to know the participants narratives in detail. During this time I arranged to meet separately with each of the participants to review their transcripts and obtain their approval.

I began the data analysis process by creating a chart that with the tentative categories of, participants personal background, motivation for becoming a teacher, teaching experience, relationship building, pre-service training and teacher effectiveness. I also wanted to allow space

for emergent categories. I then formed some conclusions and extrapolations for the impact of this research and its effectiveness for teacher training. These findings, while specific to the case being studied when generalized to a larger population, may have limitations.

There have been many research studies that have addressed the issues of teacher effectiveness, teacher preparation, Aboriginal education, and social justice as referred to in my Literature Review. My research will add to this body of knowledge. It looked at these issues from the non-Aboriginal educators' perspective: what are the major barriers that they experienced that have challenged their attaining effectiveness in their classroom when working with Aboriginal students. It will also consider ways that they have met and overcome these barriers. These issues will provide insight into which characteristics and attributes are necessary to maximize the opportunity for student success and teacher effectiveness.

## **Chapter 4**

### **Participants Tell Their Stories**

This study was designed to explore patterns, trends, and issues that can be found within the stories of non-Aboriginal teachers working with Aboriginal students. In this chapter the research findings will be presented. The data was collected using semi-structured interviews with four participants. The purpose of this research is to consider the interactions between social justice issues, Aboriginal education, and teacher effectiveness with the teacher's perceptions of their success and effectiveness when working with Aboriginal students. The study examined these issues from the perspective of experienced non-Aboriginal teachers working with Aboriginal students in a variety of classroom locations and settings.

#### **Context of the Study**

The interview process was quite interesting. I had to modify the process somewhat from my initial plan. Two of the candidates who had verbally agreed to participate had to withdraw at the last minute: one due to personal reasons, the other due to work related commitments. I was fortunate that another candidate stepped forward and volunteered. This left me with four people to interview. Two had experience in both a Northern First Nations Reserve school and in rural schools with a mixed classroom population. The other two had experiences in a rural school with a mixed classroom population as well as urban schools with mixed populations. The mixed populations are made up of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students, while the northern school population is made up almost exclusively of Aboriginal students.

The conversations took place during one sitting within a timeframe of 2-3 hours. The initial part of the interview was to set the frame of reference for the conversations and to explain the procedure. During this phase, each of the participants clearly indicated that they would not be interested in a focus group setting, for a variety of reasons. Considering the logistics of getting



them together, the decision was made to forgo the focus group and concentrate on the interview process. During the selection of candidates there was no need to have a separate introductory interview from which to build a relationship because the researcher and participants knew each other. So, it was agreed that only one interview was required. This interview was conducted at a mutually agreed upon place. These included a public coffee shop, restaurant, and a participant's home.

All of the remaining conditions, agreements from their respective school divisions, signed participation forms, electronic recording and transcription of the interview, review of the transcript, were adhered to.

### **The Narrative of Experience**

The participants are all practicing teachers who hold Professional 'A' Certification in the province of Saskatchewan. The information reported is summarized from the interview. The sequence of the participants' stories is chronological according to the order in which the interviews were conducted. Each of the stories begins with a biographical summary. The names of the participants, the schools, communities and any other identifying information have been changed to protect the anonymity of the individuals. The interview transcripts have been edited for readability and chronology and approved by the participants to ensure authenticity of the stories.

Based on my Methodology Chapter, I decided to present the interviews as narratives of experience. This allowed the interviews to focus on the narratives and privilege the lives of the teachers. Consequently, the narratives are presented as a conversation between the individual participant and the researcher.

### **Mary's Story.**

Mary began her teaching career in an isolated northern reserve community called Marshall. This community was isolated but accessible by road and had around 600 residents of Dene descent. The school was a Nursery to Grade 12 facility with around 240 students. After two years she moved to the small rural farming community of Piney located just South of Cromer, where she has been for the past seven years. This community has around 400 residents serving a rural farming community. The school itself is a Kindergarten to Grade 8 facility with 89 students.

Mary grew up in a typical middle class family. She had her mother, father, and a brother around her. She followed a common path, attending the local elementary school and high school.

### ***Overcoming challenges.***

School was a challenge for Mary. "I always found school to be a struggle," she said, "I was always the person that would wait for my friends to finish their questions so I could ask them what the answers were, to help me".<sup>2</sup> She went through both elementary school and high school experiencing academic struggles: "all through school I struggled and I didn't understand why and then I would like . . . think that if I was a teacher maybe these are some of the things I could do to help people like myself." Since academic success was difficult to attain Mary held various part-time jobs during high school mostly in the restaurant or catering business: "the restaurant business was pretty much what I stuck with," she said. "I'm more of a hands on learner so when they would just show me what to do it was a lot easier than if they said, here's the book," she added.

In spite of her personal struggles at school she knew that she wanted to be a teacher and try to help kids:

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<sup>2</sup> All quotations in this section are from Mary Heart.

We used to have a couple of kids in our class that had behaviour problems or would get in trouble quite a bit and I was always thinking what I could do to help them out or something? There was another boy who would always be in trouble at school and so for a little while I would sit beside him and we'd kind of get to know each other. It was just that he needed someone to talk to who would be o.k. with just talking, not making fun of him or things like that. So I thought maybe when I'm a teacher I'll make sure that I watch for these guys in my class, 'cause this teacher sure isn't', you know.

Mary struggled through high school and wasn't sure she could get through university: "how can I be a teacher without having to go to university?" she would wonder, "because school was just hell for me. It was not fun, I used to struggle with everything." She tried one unsuccessful semester at the University of Cromer, but wasn't allowed to continue. She entered the workforce and after a while found another route. She went to Seven Sisters, but her struggles continued. She tried the Speech Pathology Program but was advised to seek another path. It ended up being a combination of Elementary Education and Special Education, "because I still wanted to figure a way to help kids and being in one little room, I didn't like that. I wanted to be with a classroom." After enrolling in a study-skills course an instructor noticed something on an assignment and asked Mary if she could do some testing on her. It turned out that she was diagnosed with ADHD and a learning disability in mathematics. "They put me on Ritalin, and it was like a whole new world," and "then once I started taking the medication it was like things made sense. It was like, it was really different; it was like a whole new (way to) learn."

After graduation Mary found herself as a substitute teacher, and "then a friend of mine had gotten a job up North on a reserve. He asked to see if I could get a job because then he'd

have someone to go with.” She was invited to an interview and was successful in obtaining her first teaching assignment. This was in a N-12 school in small northern First Nations community. The community itself had about 600 residents the vast majority of whom were Aboriginal.

Although her undergraduate training had been in special education and elementary education this first teaching assignment was in grade 8. Mary said this about that first year:

I did struggle and I think that was probably one of my most stressful years. Just because I had to teach myself so that I could teach them and they, they were at so many different levels in the classroom that I had. I had some students that were 16 years old in my grade 8 classroom. So the conversations in that classroom, went from a 13 year old to a 16 year old, which was a huge change.

A change in teaching assignments the next year allowed Mary to move to grade two: “then the second year I got to teach grade 2 and that was really good as well.” She enjoyed that year, but due to personal reasons decided not to return for a third year and moved back to Cromer and looked for a position closer to home.

She is now in her seventh year at Piney school, a rural K-8 school with around 80 students about 50 kilometers outside of Cromer. She spent 3 years as the Student Services Teacher and is now in her fifth year with a different assignment. She explained, “I teach grade 2 and 3 right now . . . I’ve been doing that for, I think it’s my fifth year.”

***Teacher effectiveness.***

When asked to define an effective teacher Mary paused to think and then offered the following:

I would say, that they need to make sure that they follow the curriculum, they

make their goals and their year plans; and then, trying to adapt to the children in your classroom. Because, there are kids that are at different levels. They learn in different ways, so, in every lesson I try to make sure that I incorporate many things. That's what I think an effective teacher would do; things that are hands-on, that they're not always just sitting, group work and building relationships. Using a variety of teaching strategies. Making sure that you're prepared and you have an organized classroom, the kids see that. A positive outlook on education; because if you're excited about learning it rubs off on them and they get excited about learning.

Mary identified two key components that an effective teacher must possess: flexibility and student engagement; which she referred to as teachable moments. It is important to recognizing that plans might change when children are involved:

maybe I wasn't planning on someone bringing something to share. The other day a little girl brought a bear skull to class, I didn't want to touch it at first but the kids wanted me to, so I did. Then we were talking about that and it was really cool because the kids were all engaged in it. So, I try to encourage them to bring different things. I would never have seen a bear skull and probably would have never picked it up either. This little girl is showing it to the class and she's pulling teeth out of it and talking about it and they're all excited about it too. So every moment is a teaching moment whether it has to do with relationships or behaviours or the curriculum material.

***Classroom realities.***

When asked about success and challenges she's faced during her teaching career, Mary identified that many of her successes occurred with students when they had supportive parents. She said,

“if the kids actually were getting support at home for being at school, or if you sent something home they would do it. The kids had more success than if they were coming to school and putting in time.” There were however, many students who didn’t have supportive families. These were the kids that Mary tried to reach out to. She recognized that for many of the students (up North) they simply needed an adult to talk to. She said, “I used to stress that when I taught grade 8, if you need someone to talk to and you can’t find somebody, or you don’t trust somebody, then try to find someone that you can because you should have somebody.” She, as well as other teachers often took on this role with the older students, but they weren’t the only ones, “you know, I’d found a lot of the elders were really good with that; just someone for the students to talk to. Sometimes that’s just what they (the students) needed.” More importantly, Mary offered:

I was also trying to teach them about life as well. I just wanted to make a difference. I just wanted them to know that there’s more to things and sometimes we don’t have control over things in our families but we can choose to do better if we want. I used to share my stories with them; like about how a teacher told me I wouldn’t make it in school or how I struggled all through school. So, I try to share those stories to show that, look even though we struggle, we can still do something . . . and be good and do good things. That we don’t have to follow a path that isn’t so good all the time . . . you know and a lot of them needed to hear that. Some of them would act and say ‘oh well, you know you don’t know anything.’ But I would tell them, no, I’ve been around. I’ve experienced things in life that they need to know and that they’re not the only ones who have struggled in life.

There were students who were experiencing school in the same way she had. They had learning challenges that were undiagnosed and this caused them to struggle. Mary has differentiated her

classroom by modifying the content, the process, the product and the learning environment (Tomlinson, 1999; Tomlinson, 2001; Tomlinson & McTighe, 2006). This has allowed her to reach and engage more students than she might have been able using a more traditional approach. She once had a grade 8 student who was reading at a much lower grade level, so she got him some material at the level he was at and tried to move him along. For others she would adapt assignments to make the work less stressful. Another strategy was to ask students questions that she knew could be answered, “and if I knew what kind of question he could give me an answer to then I would ask him those. I wouldn’t be asking him something that I knew was going to be a struggle and that he would get frustrated or embarrassed if he didn’t know the answer.” She explained that for other students she used a different strategy:

I think sometimes they would just get all the same type of work, a teacher would just give everybody the same thing. So, if they did poorly once, they would end up doing poorly all year. They were not learning and they would get frustrated if they got the same mark because they’re doing the same stuff. So, I would give an assignment and I would say, ‘maybe just do 10 questions.’ I’d pull them aside or I’d talk to them when I knew nobody else was listening, or I’d pull them to the back and say, ‘oh, I just wanted to go over your assignment with you,’ and then I would just tell them, ‘you know maybe next time I’m going to have you do just 10. When I tell everyone else to do the whole page, you just do 10 and then hand it in to me,’ and they would say ‘oh, ok.’ . . . they get so overwhelmed by so much that if you keep it simple they would have success at answering 10 questions than worrying that they have to finish 30 and then they get them all wrong, or the majority of them wrong. But, if they can do 10 and it takes them longer to do it and they actually get them right then they feel good about themselves. Then I try

to emphasize that and say, 'hey look, see look how well you did.' I would explain to them that some people learn faster than others and in different ways, so we'll try to figure out what works for you.

This awareness of the students helped build the relationship with them, "so I think it helped quite a bit as well to eliminate some of the off-task behaviours in the classroom. They came to realize, I think, 'oh, she's really not trying to be mean or, you know, that she's actually trying, she's here to help and do her job.'"

***Meeting student needs.***

Mary went on to explain that she felt that the students, both those in the North and down South needed structure: "as soon as you give them a little bit of leeway they'll just take that and they will start doing their own thing." Quite often the students seemed to lack structure in their lives and had little or no expectations. She came to believe that many of her students needed these things as well as consistency.

Although Mary's teaching experience has been in rural schools the communities and student demographics were quite different. The Northern Community of Marshal had between 600-800 hundred people and was accessible by road, but the closest urban community was around 3 hours away. When asked how the community accepted her because she was from outside the community, Mary said, "it depends, for certain things I felt very welcomed and for other things it was, you know what your, your colour was, you knew what you were, in the community." She went on to say that making the effort to go out and learn about things and spending time with elders was very positive, "I had built a relationship with an elder and he actually would come to the classroom and see how I was doing. He would ask things like, 'oh, is everything good?' and 'can I make bannock for the classroom?' or something like that.



At other times it was just making the effort that helped breakdown some of the barriers: even when I went out to the games room for example, even the people who were there who were older, not students age, were oh, kind of shocked that I was in there. Still they would say, ‘do you want to come and play a game?’ They would welcome you. . . certain different activities that were going on they’d ask, ‘do you want to join in this or this is going on this weekend, do you want to go ice fishing?’ I had gone to some of the sweat lodges and found that that was very good as well and it built some relationships, relationships with people that . . . once I started doing that I felt a little bit more accepted into the community but yet I was still always felt like an outsider.

Piney is a small rural community of about 400 people, but it is located relatively close to Cromer where Mary currently resides. Although this has allowed her to live close to family and commute daily to school she is aware of some challenges: “when you’re outside and you don’t live in the community that was a whole different thing for me. So, I asked myself what can I do to feel part of the community?” She found an answer by making attempts to attend her students’ activities like baseball games, hockey games, and dance recitals:

the kids, they still bring me their hockey schedules, they still bring me their baseball schedules, they are telling me when their dance recitals are, you know those kinds of things. ‘Can you make it?’ When you do, when you show up, like I swear that’s all they focus on not really the game. I’ve heard the parents say things like, ‘oh, that’s cool that you drove an hour to watch their hockey game on your day off.’ So, I do find that being out at that school now, this is my sixth year, I have built a good relationship

with the parents and they see that I'm there and that I care about their kids. It doesn't matter that much that I don't live in the community. The bottom line is this; are you there just to teach, just doing your job or do you go above and beyond sometimes.

When the kids see that you make that extra effort and show them that you care, they feel pretty cool about that too. That's what I find, I really find that there's a lot of, more success sometimes and then they kind of are excited, like, 'Oh, she's actually a real person'.

Mary then talked about what she's gained from her experiences in both communities, "I've learned a lot from, from everywhere and I've learned positive things as well as negative. I just wish I could change things, too, but those things I don't have control over, but what I do have control over is what happens in my classroom and I want those kids to feel that it is their safe place. The classroom has to be their safe learning space."

Mary explained her concept of an ideal classroom: "I just think that the ideal classroom is not what I envisioned, truly, I find that you have to have many different things in your classroom. You just can't expect them to just sit in their desk all day long," she said, "I find that I need to take little breaks or do different things, have my classroom set up differently; so maybe when we're reading they're sitting in a different area, they're not just in their desk, maybe we have beanbags or pillows and things like that."

Mary recognizes that although her current school doesn't have a large Aboriginal population there are always a few in her classroom. These students as well as the non-Aboriginal students benefit from her student centered approach. She explained that she learned this working with different students over the years:

it is nothing that I've been prepared for, that's for sure, they didn't teach me that in

school. I've learned a lot and it helps me to be a better teacher. I'd rather be that way than just the person who is always by the book. So, I teach what I need to and I try to find out what works for them and makes them feel good. When they feel good and they're all excited I know they're learning. I know that I've done something that has benefited somebody and made a difference, that's what I want.

### **Cory's Story.**

Cory began his teaching career in Nellin, a small northern reserve community. It is a community of around 600 residents primarily of Aboriginal descent. The school is a Nursery-Grade 12 facility with about 240 students. After three years he left the community and teaching to travel for a few months. Upon returning to Canada Cory obtained a position in Wiggins, a rural community in north central Saskatchewan, primarily a farming community but with a significant First Nations/Metis population. He has been teaching there for the past seven years.

Cory had a typical middle class upbringing. He grew up on a farm just outside Gardenton, with his parents, a professional couple and two siblings. He attended Louise School where he participated in many extra-curricular activities. After high school he worked and travelled, but knew that he would someday go to university. He decided to attend The University of Kensington since it was close to home. Considering his background in sports, he applied to and was accepted into the College of Kinesiology. After a couple of years in that College he transferred into Education where he completed his Bachelor's degree.

His extended practicum (internship) was a very positive experience. However, it was at an urban middle class elementary school in Gardenton:

an all white school pretty much, no immigrants or anybody really. It was a great experience, the kids were good, they were your well behaved kids and that's what it was, that's what I was taught, that's what I was going to get and then later on when I had my own classroom.<sup>3</sup>

When asked about being prepared for the technical side of teaching he thought he was

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<sup>3</sup> All quotations in this section are from Cory Cardinal.

prepared, “they did an ok job on that part. It was more in the classroom, everything that happens in your classroom, the day-to-day stuff of dealing with kids. There are kids who wake up on the wrong side of the bed, those that have issues with parents, family members, or friends stuff like that was missing from my university,” he said.

***Innovation in the classroom.***

When he began his first teaching assignment he hoped he would be successful. He knew there would be challenges but he also brought enthusiasm and a willingness to try innovative things to engage the students. He brought in a survivor challenge in Nellin. This was a weekly activity that fully engaged the students. As he explained, “we’d do them once a week and the kids just looked forward to them, but they knew that they had to be in the classroom and they had to be well behaved; they had to do their homework and the funny one is they also had to be at school.” He added, “I had one student Adam Smith. I noticed that after about three weeks he only came to school on Thursdays and so that’s when I first made the change. I said, ‘you’ve got to be in school leading up to it’ and he never missed anymore school because he always wanted to be part of the challenges.” The other project he put in place at Wiggins was a ‘Lunar Colony’:

What it is, is that we learn about space in Science 7. So, I get about 400 garbage bags taped together to make a structure that is blown up and the students live in there for a day. It’s completely dark and they have flashlights and then they have a folder that’s got their activities from 9 o’clock right through 3 o’clock. This could be school work or experiments to do things related to space. But, what we also do is bring in both the grade 5 and grade 6 class and they get to walk around in the gym. It’s dark, they can see into the Lunar Colony itself, so they get an idea of what they’re going to get in the next year. This builds excitement and they look forward to it.

They are also told that if they don't behave and they're not working they don't get to do it.

Cory noticed differences in expectations when he moved within the two school systems, “just a change coming from a Band controlled school to the public system, I felt overwhelmed. The first year, I remember saying to Jackie [my wife], ‘I don't know if I want to keep doing this’. I was just overwhelmed with the expectations of what I was to do, I was taking on the role of the Athletic Director, I was coaching and had many classes to prepare for and, I was like ‘whoa’ all the time with all the expectations being placed on me.” Asked if these expectations were by the system or by the students and the parents, he said, “I would say by the system, but they didn't really say it to me, it's just what I felt and needed to . . . whether it was true or not I still don't know, I still don't.”

The success that Cory experienced working with First Nations Students has kept him firmly anchored in the classroom and the school he is currently in, but the temptation to test the waters elsewhere is present. “I've always talked about with Jackie is that I'd like to teach in a non-Aboriginal school. So, I can see what the benefits are there and not because I've only taught in First Nations Schools . . . and coached there. I'd like to coach non-Aboriginal kids and see how it is different and even go back to Aboriginal kids afterwards,” he said, “but I think it comes back to the role model, the position I have as role model, that's why I don't leave Wiggins because I enjoy it . . . I love where I'm at.”

### ***Helping students to succeed.***

Cory believes that it is necessary to go beyond the curriculum and do some extra things that aren't normally done in order to deal with some of the challenges that he and his students face. In identifying challenges, he said, “the biggest challenge I find is students coming and not,

not all, but a lot of them not being taught how to deal with crisis or problems; how to react when things don't go your way. Quitting is very common because it seems like the easiest thing to do. It's very important to help the kids work through their challenges." He finds this not only a problem in the classroom but also on the basketball court where he coaches the senior boys' team; I tell the players, "the easiest thing for them to do right now is to quit this team. Go ahead, you don't need to be here, you can quit if you want, that's the easiest thing you can do," and I say, "the hardest thing you'll do is stay on this team, but the best thing you'll do is succeed at the end and you'll go, 'man I worked my ass off this year. I know why Cardinal was tough on us, I know why he said the things he did about being easy to quit'."

This attitude often finds its way into his classroom and working around it can become quite a challenge:

so that's one of the struggles that I find with kids at my school is that, that's what they see it's easy to quit, or that they haven't been taught life's tough . . . so I guess that's the biggest thing I work on. It could be in math class, I teach a Math 10 class and I just constantly talk about it. I always use that example of leading a horse to the water; I'll lead you guys, here's the work, here's how to do it, here's the procedure, the steps to do it, but man if you're not going to try you're not going to get very far in this math. It's the same with life; you go to a job and you don't abide by what your employer wants you to do like wearing that silly hat or being on time, well then you're not going to have a job. I say this a lot in both basketball and in my classroom.

***Being effective.***

When asked to define what he thought an effective teacher was, Cory said:

I think an effective teacher is somebody that first has to be able to have respect from

their kids coming in and being able to relate with them. I've seen teachers struggle in the classroom, time after time, because they don't open up or allow the kids to open up outside of the classroom and get to know each other. It could be just in the hallway sitting with them and talking with them, joking with them, going to their hockey games, taking an interest in their life.

After thinking about it, Cory went on to say that he felt he might be an effective teacher:

I've done a really good job and that's why I feel I'm more successful; it's just because I try to be in touch with the kids. If you ask the kids though, which teachers do you enjoy being in their classroom and a lot of the times you'll get, 'well I like to be in Cardinal's classroom.' It's not necessarily that I'm a great teacher, but I take an interest in them and they feel welcome to be in there and they know I care about them. At the same time I hold them to a standard that they need to, to do their work or behave or whatever it might be.

Cory also added that he encourages his students as well:

I teach my students that no answer is not a good answer. A wrong answer is ok, as long as you're trying and you're trying to drink that water and we can take bits of your wrong answer and see what's right about it and go from there.

***Making a difference.***

Cory has found that he also needs to set a structure and routines for his students, "our kids at Wiggins need routine and it needs to be defined and repeated." In order to accomplish this he starts his year by explaining to the students what they need to do in order to be successful in his class:

If you look at my Science 7 Class, I probably take the first three to four classes and



that's what we work on. It's visual, it has to be so that they get a clear picture of what is expected. I teach them it and then I test them on it. So, I have, Mr. Cardinal's Essential Rules and so I test them on it for the first week and then throughout the year. They know it and they have to come prepared. That was the first rule; they had to come with a pencil, their notebook, and the textbook; they have to, there's no exceptions. Second rule is that there's no 'tsking' or rude gestures and so I teach them what those are; for example 'you've got homework for pages 7 to 100', now everyone do a 'tsk' or roll your eyes. They now know what they are and it's clear to them that these things are unacceptable. The third rule is that they have to say 'please and thank-you'. So, if I'm giving them a piece of paper I'll hold it in my hand and they'll take it and I won't let go until they say thank-you. I want to teach them respect, so I only have 3 Essential Rules that I teach with the Middle Years.

Routine, structure, and consistency are important factors for effective teachers to possess, Cory said, "they know my rules, they know where I stand." He did mention that some of his colleagues get into trouble in this area:

I think that's one of the things that some teachers struggle with. They don't hold those lines and then when they start dropping them that's when they lose a little bit of control in the classroom or they have more issues and that's when they're going straight to the office with that student.

The role of extra curricular is very important for Cory. When asked to explain it he said:

I look at the guys on my basketball team, I coach senior basketball. I'd say out of the 10 that I have on my team, probably 9 of them are struggling in school and it's a way for them to be part of something that they're successful at.

Cory went on to say:

I've got one kid named Steven, who is constantly in trouble, with his teachers, constantly not getting his homework done and he's got a bad home life. He's a totally different kid on the basketball team. I took them on a trip last weekend and he was probably the most polite kid I had on the trip; at a restaurant saying please and thank-you and not yelling, whereas in the classroom he's the first one off the wall. So, I think the role of extra cur is so big for some of these kids who don't have a lot going on for them academically.

Asked if he saw the same influence for extra-curricular up North, Cory said:

you know, it goes back to that extra cur, I think a lot of those boys that did get involved with the volleyball up there, they were there because of volleyball, probably first and school second and so that's a mindset that education wasn't as important.

***The role of education.***

A constant struggle is getting the message to the students that education is important and that some of the classes they are taking, while not interesting are important. This may be a result of the value placed on education by his students:

they don't value education as much as they need to, they value it, but not as much as they need to. When they see how important it is later on, because we have this Store Front Program where we see kids coming back and they're 21 and saying, 'man I need this education now.' Well they didn't realize it till 4 years later.

The Store Front Program also can have a positive influence on young students, Cory said:

because the young kids can see their brothers or sisters coming back and going and telling them, you know, get this done. So that Steven kid that I talked about in basketball,

his brothers in that program and you know we almost see the same thing, Steven could go that route too, but his brother is good and says, look get your ass in gear Steven.

Cory sees evidence that while Wiggins has remained a rural school the demographics have changed, “when I first got there I would say its would have been about 50-60% Aboriginal, now it’s at least 80%, so we’re predominantly a First Nations school now.” The reason for this growth is a combination of factors: “I think they’re more welcoming in the school now and whether they’re having conflicts out on the reserve with their education or their school or their principal or their chief or whatever those things are they’re coming to our school.” He feels that this growth is also due to the parents’ commitment, “there’s no bussing, they have to drive themselves, so it’s the parents making the choice that I will drive you 30 kilometers, or whatever it is from the far side of the reserve to Wiggins and back, twice a day.”

He isn’t sure what the reasons are, but although many parents value education they don’t show up in the school for activities:

so, there’s a big commitment on the part of the parents, there is, yet at the same time you don’t see the parents. It could be the Residential upbringing where they just don’t like school or the system, you know they’re afraid, but they want it for their kids, so there’s some recognition of the need for it.

Asked if it was perhaps the way they showed the value that was confusing Cory said:

maybe a better way of putting it is they don’t show the value as much as maybe they do value it. Whereas I think it is being involved, coming to parent teacher interviews, coming out to your sons’ game, those kinds of things that show you value their education and we don’t see that.

So the goal is to communicate with the parents. Cory said, “I send out letters which say, your son has this game, we’re working really hard, these the things we’re learning, not just on the court . . . we would like to see you and your family out to the games.” This doesn’t always work, “still I don’t see some of the parents. I had to phone this kid Frankie’s Dad in PA just to come because it was his last game and his dad did show, but I had to take that step . . . you know, those kind of things. I think he still valued it but he just didn’t show it I guess.”

Cory referred to a note he received from a student that wasn’t about academics, but rather was about the larger role he played in the student’s life:

It’s just a thank-you note and it wasn’t about academics, it was just, ‘Cards you know, you were like a father figure. I had a Dad, or I had a step-Dad that was the biggest drug dealer, I could have chosen to go that route, but you always told me that you never did drugs and you taught me the importance of being on time and respecting your adults.’ You know I carry that on into my work now and that was really nice to hear. It wasn’t teaching him how to shoot a basketball, or to know the chemistry I was teaching him. It had nothing to do with that it was just being a person to him. One of the comments was that you always said good morning with a joke or something like that. So, students really do take those things outside the classroom that teachers do. It goes back to my first point that I find probably one of the most important things is, with these kids anyway; they need you as an adult figure, a positive role model.

## **Debbie's Story**

Debbie began her teaching career with a half-time maternity replacement contract in Holland, a rural farming community in northeastern Saskatchewan. The school was a Kindergarten to Grade Twelve school where she taught a split grade 4-5 class, "I was only half time so I didn't do math and language arts".<sup>4</sup> At the end of this contract she was prepared to accept the role as a substitute teacher until a contract was offered at Dugald High School a grade 9-12 school. She accepted and has been teaching P.E., Language Arts, and Biology there for seven years.

In high school Debbie was an active student. She participated in school sports, playing on the Senior Girls Basketball team in Grade 10 and then teaching gymnastics lessons as a part-time job during senior high school. This experience teaching gymnastics lessons made her think about teaching as a career: "I had positive school experiences, I just loved being at school. I loved teaching gymnastics lessons, I loved working with the kids."

Debbie came from a middle class family; she was the middle child of three sisters. During her final two years of high school, Debbie's father became ill and passed away just before her high school graduation. As traumatic as the event was in her life she didn't let it deter her from her dream. She had other family supports and friends to rely on:

you know what it was, it was, and it was almost like I was so excited to move away from home I didn't really know what I was in for . . . I really enjoyed being in Kleefeld. I lived with a close friend of mine, so that was . . . it made it easier. It wasn't like I was on my own, I had a group of friends that went as well.

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<sup>4</sup> All quotations in this section are from Debbie Adams.

*A path to the classroom.*

Debbie's educational path was very typical in the community she grew up in. A small, close knit elementary, a junior high with much larger class sizes, and then high school at a very large and diverse comprehensive. After high school she went directly to university in Kleefeld; she said, "there was absolutely no doubt in my mind I was going to school in Kleefeld."

Although there were other options open to her she enrolled in the College of Kinesiology and completed her degree. During this time she was thinking about her career and was drawn to Education. She had enjoyed her biology classes at both high school and university and thought that maybe she could become a Biology and Phys. Ed. teacher. This seemed to be a good fit for her. "I always really liked to go to school . . . I like the atmosphere, I like interacting with other people, I like getting to know different people and, I've always had a really positive school experience." She also reflected back on her experiences teaching gymnastics lessons and began to formulate a philosophy of education:

when you think about gymnastics lessons, I mean I started teaching gymnastics lessons when I was 16, so I was pretty young. I really started to realize then how different kids were, right. I always had the ones, who really wanted to be there, are there early and they follow me around until it's their turn and then there are the one's who are there because their parents are making them be there. . I really began to see the diversity in kids and I kind of realized then that I need to make it a welcoming environment in order for them to want to be there. So, even though you're forced to be there, let's just make the best of it right. We've got to get the job done but let's have a little fun while we're doing it. I think the biggest challenge for me was getting those kids going and wanting to come back.

Her first exposure to small town living was during her internship at Ninette, and she was very involved in the school particularly coaching. She felt the internship helped prepare her for being a teaching, but not for the type of kids she might encounter: “it was not a very diverse community at all . . . the culturally diverse aspect was not in the community at all, so it . . . didn’t prepare me in that way,” she said.

The year she spent teaching in Holland offered somewhat more diversity of students and student needs, she said, “we had a fairly small class, about 18 students, and we had a few students who came from William Jones, who were bussed in.” However, she explained that there was more diversity in student needs than in student demographics:

we had some really diverse kids as far as learning needs. I had 2 students who actually ended up being at Dugald, who I taught in Holland; which was neat to see them a few years later. We had everything from some students who would move onto life skills and alternate education classes to students who I thought could go onto post-secondary. So, it was a very diverse class as far as learning needs go and it was a big adjustment in that way for me.

Debbie didn’t know what to expect when she accepted the contract at Dugald. Dugald is a Grade 9 – 12 facility with a student population of around 250 students. The school is located in a low socio economic neighborhood of a city in northern central Saskatchewan. The student population is primarily Aboriginal. Debbie was very pleased to have a full-time contract teaching physical education and other subjects. Her initial thoughts were:

Ok, this is what I need to do, this is how I’m going to plan. Not knowing what kind of kids I’m having, not having, really any insights that I just planned over the summer and this is what I’m going to do and got there and realized; my plans are not going to work

right, so I mean that was a big adjustment.

There was a disconnect between what Debbie expected from her class and what the students were willing to offer:

I was thinking that I would have 20 students in the gym who would be ready to participate and that's not what I had my first year. So, I quickly realized that all of the planning that I did and how I like to be somebody who has everything done start to finish before I do it wasn't going to work and I had to be more flexible, so that first couple of weeks was a huge adjustment for me, I had a very small class for one of my phys ed classes, I think I had just a few kids, a handful of kids on any given day, a girl's grade 10 class or something and they had to take the phys ed credit to graduate. It wasn't kids who wanted to participate in phys ed, they had to do it because it was the credit that they needed. It required a different mindset and I learned to be very flexible and to be able to plan loosely. I know what I'm going to be doing but be able to change it and still have an idea of what I need to cover. This is what we're going to do and we'll get it done; it just might vary a little from day to day.

***Making adjustments and becoming effective.***

There were other things that required Debbie to make adjustments in her thinking and teaching practice, "the absent rate and things like that was something that was new to me, I hadn't really experience that before, so that was a big adjustment."

After teaching for 10 years in schools with vastly different dynamics Debbie offered the following when asked how she would define an effective teacher:

A teacher's effectiveness could vary from day to day. If I think about myself, I mean I have my good days and I have my bad days. I think that some days I'm more



effective than others. I think that somebody who's effective is not necessarily just getting the curriculum across, but somebody who probably knows their students and not necessarily on a personal level, their good friends or anything, but can read their students when they walk in the door and can tell if they're having a bad day or a good day or if something's happened or things like that. You get to know them a little bit better and it takes time as well, but I think that as far as effectiveness goes relationships are huge, and that goes for any kind of kid. You have to be able to get them to want to be there and for them to want to come in on their own and make a choice and realize that wherever they're going it's not a bad place to be and they're going to be with people that might not be so bad in the long run.

***Building relationships.***

Debbie identified relationships as being important, when asked what are some of the foundations that those relationships are based on, she said, "I think that it takes time, definitely, it's not something I learned quickly. In general it takes time to gain the experience and confidence and it takes time for the relationships to grow," she added:

kids are not going to walk into the classroom and immediately like what's going on, like what they see or like the atmosphere. It takes consistency; it takes time, I think that's what's important. You give them that time and they come to realize that.

Obviously some students will quickly pass judgment, saying things like; I don't like this, I don't like the room or I don't like this person or whatever quickly, but to be able to give it a try and work themselves into it eventually. I also think the classroom has to have a good atmosphere. What I mean is I have to get through the curriculum and the kids know this is what we need to get done today but it's ok to

have a little fun too. This also goes beyond the classroom as well, you need to talk to your kids, you need to get to know them as a person. So it's ok to ask them, what are you doing the weekend? Do you have plans? It's Friday, what's going on? Are you working? Where do you work? That kind of thing.

Debbie then added:

It's not just, this is what we need to get done, you're here for this hour or two and a half hours or whatever and then see you tomorrow. It's more, you want to talk to them when you see them in Wal-Mart, three years after they've graduated and you can only do that if you've put the effort in to build a positive relationship with them.

Debbie also said that it's important to keep things in perspective:

the most difficult thing I face is not taking things personally, especially when students don't show up to your class. In the beginning it used to be (upsetting) now with experience I've kind of learned that's how life works for these kids. Sometimes they can't make it, I get that, but when they do come we'll do as much as we possibly can without scaring them away, so that they do want to come back.

She explained that she doesn't just sit back and wait for the students to show up after an absence, she tries to make contact with them:

So, for example, when a student hasn't been to school, I always try to make contact with them. I give them a phone call and tell them I'm still here, where have you been? Do you think you're going to be coming back?' Just try to have a conversation with them. If it's not the student I talk to and it's a family member, I try to get the message across to them that I would like to talk to them see if there's anything I can help with. I invite them to come and talk to me or to give me a phone call or send an

email or whatever they can do. I think that I've had some success because it always seems like there's always one or two that I'm helping. So, maybe they haven't come to school in 3 days but, they do phone you and say, 'you know what I'm stuck,' or 'I haven't been able to get into town,' or whatever the case may be. They'll come in at lunch, or they'll catch me in the hallway and say, 'yeah, I know I have lots to do. Can I pick up some homework because I haven't been able to?' That's huge, for them to be able to approach me and say, 'this is why I haven't been here.' I don't even ask for a story.

Debbie said that creating this relationship is easier when she remains focused on her main goal for her students. She is always telling them, "I want you to get through this course and I want you to be successful so tell me what I can do to help you with that." She feels confident that this approach is working well for many of her students:

I think showing that I care, that I'm here is something that has worked. Many of those kids eventually do come to school regularly. The more I can create that atmosphere where it's welcoming and it's a good environment. If they feel comfortable then they know that school's definitely going to be a positive thing when they see that you care and they can talk to you.

The student demographics and the community dynamics are different from Holland to Dugald. This has forced her to deal with the students in a different manner. She said, "I think it makes me look at things in a different perspective, like I said, I'm definitely a planner, I need to learn to be more flexible." The key to success she feels is, "as far as how things work for the students, I think that the most important thing for success is consistency, they need to have certain people there that they need to know will be there as much as possible."

Debbie has been at her current school for eight years. She feels that this is major factor in achieving consistency and building relationships:

teaching at Dugald for eight years has really been a positive thing. I often get to teach the brothers and sisters and I know other family members talk; who's your teacher, what classes are you taking, oh is so and so teaching that and I have Adams for this. So, I think that consistency is really important.

This also has a benefit when contacting home:

within the families, you taught a sibling and then the parents come back for an interview, or they get a phone call and I leave my name with a message then they know who that is. They can put a face to a name they know. They know who the phone call is coming from, they know what to expect, they've heard about you before and I think that's a positive thing.

Debbie explained that she's heard it said that a teacher shouldn't stay in a school too long, "I mean there are a lot of people who say you shouldn't be in a school for a lot of years or whatever, but I think that's definitely one of the positive things is that I do get to know families and friends and that's how we get our students is referrals a lot of the time."

### ***The changing role of a classroom teacher.***

Although Debbie works hard to provide consistency and to build positive relationships she has notice that there is a lack of parental involvement at the high school level:

parent involvement in high school is pretty limited to begin with, I think a lot of parents start to back off a little bit and let their kids take some ownership and accountability for what they're doing as they're getting older and that's one of life's lessons. So, parent involvement has been very different." That doesn't mean there is no parent involvement

but it can be sporadic and take different forms, “it’s definitely nice to have that support, even if it’s not a parent, but a guardian, or a sibling or somebody there. You see more positive results out of kids when they have that person in their life.”

There is a much larger role for a teacher than just covering a curriculum and marking papers:

it’s definitely a big difference that I’ve seen whether that person is another staff member even that even helps. So that’s why I go back to relationship building as being so important for a lot of these kids. The teachers at the school are the one’s who they know will be there and that they can count on for good or bad things or blame or whatever. But, they know that those people are going to be there. I really think that they appreciate that over time.

She went on to add:

I’m not really sure if it’s the difference between elementary and high school or what, but parent involvement has been a huge difference and that I think has been a challenge as well because you don’t, you know, you try to talk to somebody about student performance or progress or whatever and you want to be able to talk to that person consistently and hopefully work through it with them to better the student and you don’t always have that same person to talk to. So, that’s something you’ve got to just work around and tell the kids that you’re there.

The school plays a unique role in both communities. “in a smaller community the school is the hub of everything; every community event takes place physically in the school, in the gym and things like that.” Dugald, an urban school, plays a similar role: “at Dugald we have a lot of community members in the school. The school is an important place for many to gather and

communicate. That's how I see it anyway, I'm not sure what other perspectives are, but it seems to be a fairly well respected place."

## **Keith's Story**

Keith taught for one year in Brochet Saskatchewan, a small rural farming community with a K-12 school of about 120 students. He was then hired by the Rolling Rivers School Division and spent the next five years in Cormorant, a rural farming community with about 1500 residents and a K-12 school with 290 students. He then transferred into Prawda, also in the Rolling Rivers School Division, where he spent the next five years at Tyndall School. Then he moved to Bennett School for two years as principal and then is now back at Tyndall as principal. Prawda itself is a large urban centre in north central Saskatchewan. Both Tyndall and Bennett schools are elementary K-8 facilities with around 200 students each.

Keith came from a family environment with high expectations with two older siblings who are now successful professionals; he said:

I was always compared with my siblings . . . it wasn't like I was viewed as an individual, I was more kind of compared all the time . . . there wasn't a whole lot of support unless it was with athletics and they saw that I could dominate and not be compared because they weren't that much into athletics.<sup>5</sup>

Keith's school experience as a student followed a typical path for an urban student. He attended a local elementary school, then a larger junior high school and finally a very large comprehensive high school. He succeeded in academics as well as being a student athlete, but the school had many challenges: "violence was a regular thing. It was the first place that I ever saw a knife fight. Not that that's something you want to remember, but it's just something that sticks out," he then said, "there were a lot of drugs, and stuff like that, however, the school offered students everything, Prawda Comprehensive High School offered every kind of

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<sup>5</sup> All quotations in this section are from Keith Anderson.

opportunity any student would ever want. If you were interested in trades they had everything from machining to electrical to carpentry.” Overall it was a good experience. He also said, “there was the APM, I was involved in the APM program, which was . . . the Advanced Placement Model. So they kind of singled you out as to whether or not they thought you could handle that kind of programming where it was more independent learning.”

High school was a busy time for Keith:

There was a focus on academics, like I wouldn't say that I strayed ever, I guess, from the academic standpoint, but I definitely had my interest in my hunting, fishing, snowmobiling, and stuff like that where the weekend was my free time. But, at the same time I refed hockey pretty much. I'd ref 5-10 games during the middle of the week and then on the weekends I'd do sometimes 15 – 20 games on a weekend and I'd just try and schedule it so that I'd have that free time to still do the things that I want to do as well as my academics . . .

After graduation from High School, Keith had the opportunity to complete his first year of university at home which was important:

to have that opportunity to live at home and save some cash and to stay with the people I went to school with, as a group . . . everyone who made that decision made it through their first year of university, didn't fail out, didn't do that Christmas grad thing. Many eventually moved on to other universities with the majority going to the University of Kensington.

### ***Overcoming challenges.***

Keith began teaching in Brochet, a small rural community that had a K-12 school. He found the experience challenging:



I had the lions share of the phys. ed department . . . I'm trying to think what else there was. There were 13 different subject areas that I had to prep for . . . as well as coaching all the school teams. So, I was basically spending every night, until 1 in the morning planning and at one point I had made the decision that I wasn't going back the next week . . . I ended up sticking it out, but it was definitely the fact that there was not very much to do in town and very little time to do it in. It was a town that had a post office, a credit union and a bar and that was it. There really wasn't anybody my own age around so I found it to be lonely, isolated situation.

Despite this frustration, he stuck out the school year and was fortunate enough to obtain a position in Cormorant. A bigger school in a bigger town, that was also closer to home.

When asked to describe the make-up of the staff in the two schools he said that in Brochet the staff was much older than he was, "I was the youngest staff member, the next staff member was probably 35-40 years old and it wasn't a very diverse staff at all," he said. Describing the Cormorant staff Keith said:

we didn't have anybody on staff who was of First Nations ancestry or descent, most of the people on staff were either from Cormorant originally or had taught at a smaller school location, whether it'd be a rural community or northern community and, we had a fairly young staff, there was I believe there were only 5 people who were close to retirement and the rest of the staff would be 30 years or younger.

Keith made a decision prior to accepting the position:

it seemed that they valued people who were going to stay in the community. So, I made the decision when I went into the interview that if I was going to teach there, I was going to live there, but not necessarily be there on the weekends.

Asked how this impacted his relationships with the kids, Keith said:

well, that was a huge influence, the fact that I coached a lot of the athletics, I got to know the kids very well. I didn't participate in the adult social activities and stuff like that, I let the parents know that I was there for my job; I wasn't there for the social aspect of it.

The student population in Brochet was predominately made up of white students from farm families. Cormorant, a larger community had a similar make-up of students except for the students who came from the South Junction Reserve. "When I first started teaching in Cormorant probably 15-20 kids came off the reserve to attend school in Cormorant...by the time I was done teaching in Cormorant we moved closer to 40-50 kids coming off the Reserve," he said.

Still Keith didn't see that type of relationships between the farming communities and the reserve that he expected:

it didn't make a difference if the kids were from the Reserve or anything like that, they treated each other equally, there wasn't any kind of division at all. We had numerous kids from different backgrounds who would play on the same team together and if you went on a car trip with them it'd be like having a car load of your own kids.

***Helping to break down barriers.***

He said that he felt athletics was one place where the barriers to inclusion could be removed: "athletics, for our senior athletic teams there would always be at least one kid from the reserve who would be either top or one of the top three players on the team and that kind of broke down the barriers that you would think would exist."

When asked to describe the things that he would do, in his own classroom, to help that

sense of kids being or feeling that they're part of the classroom; that the classroom is a safe place for students, he said:

Well, the number one thing is trying to find out one strength of every single kid and then playing on that. So that I had that opportunity to highlight that kid through the students strength that they have so that everybody realizes that, yeah I have something to contribute, something that is positive. Then the other students realize that if there's something that they need help with, then I can buddy them up." He also said that using humour and being friendly with kids is a great way to help them feel that they belong and have something positive to contribute, "I don't know of anybody who doesn't like to laugh and giving kids that time away from the academic side and just a quick little story that has nothing to do with it that just gets them all to laugh or, and then not allowing them to, not necessarily made rude comments, but just joking back and forth with them so that you've established that rapport that makes a huge difference.

In his role as a teacher and now a principal he has seen teachers who don't get this key relationship building piece:

I know just from being a principal and seeing staff who just put that wall up, 'I'm a teacher and you're a student and you'll listen to me because.' They don't experience that success that they could have if they'd just open the door a little bit and let the students realize, 'Hey, you're a person also, you're not just a teacher.

In order to explain what he meant Keith offered two examples. The first was with two young brothers who came to his current school from a Northern Kensington community:

they were a single parent family, low on the socio-economic scale, and no Dad in the picture. Nobody, I don't think had ever come up to them and give them

a shot in the shoulder or give them a tap in the stomach, like a little shot or whatever, just to say, 'hey, how's it going?' It wasn't like they were scared, but all of a sudden a smirk came across their face and they realized, 'Oh, you're going to joke around with me.' You know I didn't have to say anything; it was just that contact now and again, now they're playing basketball on my basketball team.

The second one was a student who was sent to the office, after he punched another student on the second day of school. Keith said to the student:

well this isn't the greatest way for me to meet you, but I'm so and so and I'm your principal, what's going on? So, he put his head down and wouldn't talk to me. He was absolutely non-verbal; just would not talk whatsoever. I just said; this is the way things are, this is the way it's going to go, and this is what I expect. He came and did his afterschool detention with me and then as the year progressed, up until this point, so December, I made sure I talked to him in the hallway when I saw him doing something good, saying 'hey, good job,' and then also did the little ribbing and give him a little shot in the shoulder and joke round with him the hallway . . . Well, now he comes to my office, he's done something he shouldn't have done, it's just like I can't shut him up, and he just talks and talks and talks. He still keeps his head down a little bit, but he can talk to me.

Keith then offered a comment that crystallized this idea, " every kid's going to have that initial shyness around an adult that they don't know. However, going the extra mile and making the extra effort to go and have a conversation and make that contact with him was definitely necessary."

When his role changed from a teacher in the classroom, or the gym, to a principal Keith felt there was an expectation that he needed to get serious:

I would say that I'm a traditional phys ed teacher. Based the fact that I make that extra effort to go out and joke around with the kids doesn't have to change now that I'm a principal. There are those times when I need to be serious, but at the same time there are those times that I need to get out and joke around with kids so that they know I'm human. I might make mistakes, but I'm going to try to make sure I make the best of the situation . . . There are a couple of teachers in our school who have the mentality that 'I'm a teacher, this is the expectation of teachers, you're a student, you're here to work and if you don't do your work well then you're going to get detention. Well, the students' don't respond to them whatsoever. They might as well close the door say, 'here's your work,' and walk out. Because even to just have those little conversations on the side to get their attention is important. Nobody can just sit there and focus for four hours in a day. They've been sitting in a seat and taking in a lot of information. You have to have those aside moments to give them a mental break. This helps to build up the rapport and keeps them focused and buying in.

***Effectiveness and success.***

Keith went on to offer a further explanation of what it means to him to be an effective teacher:

It's like a car dealership, if you go in and he says its got this, this and this, and there's no salesmanship, there's no romancing of the car, well then it's just a thing you're buying. Whereas in education you can go in and romance it for the kids, make it sound that much more flavourful, well it's that much easier to serve it up to them, buying in

right now. It's an art of salesmanship, which they don't tell you in university. It's like something that you have to develop over time, it's not just walking into a classroom and being able to read kids and being able to know who needs what. Some kids don't need that; some kids just want to come in, sit down, do their work. Whereas some other kids might need to have just a little bit of support and another might be totally shut-down because (of things happening at home). I think the key to being effective is to be able to read the kids and knowing what their strengths and their weaknesses are and then playing to their strengths as much as possible. That way there's less of a chance for them to feel left out or that they don't have any self-worth.

***Community engagement.***

Keith also identified communication with parents as necessary and something he tries to do regularly, "I try to make sure the parents were included in their education by making sure they're aware of what's going on, when kids are struggling or when they're having success." However, for some of his students, communication with parents can be a challenge as well:

I know a lot of the kids I deal with who come from up North, their parents are heavily reliant on cell phones and if they haven't, they usually have pay as you go plans, and if there's no contact number to get a hold of them and I'm relying on a cell phone number that it says, this customer's number is temporarily unavailable. Well, then that's when we start having problems because we can't get the parents involved.

The community that his school is located in has also undergone a change over the years: when the mill was open it was a middle-class, blue collar neighborhood. It is now moved towards a more socio-economically low end housing area. The area has a lot of houses that have been turned into rental properties because people who were there

have moved and sold their houses to whoever and now we're dealing with a lot more social issues that are not educational issues, they're social issues.

This change in the community dynamic has also affected the school, "we're having to deal, to refer people to the HUB.<sup>6</sup> But, it also takes up that many more hours that take me away from the educational part of our school and deal with the socio-economic and social issues that families are struggling with."

This has also had an impact on teachers as well:

there are just so many more expectations that are placed on teachers now. Even in the last 14 years that I've been teaching; it's phenomenal with the expectation with regards to data collection, testing on students, professional development of teachers and the different initiatives. Right now we're part of the Aboriginal Holistic Assessment as well as the school based coaches' project. While they're all positive things, but they're all things that take time. You can only spread teachers so thinly before they say, I can't deal with this, and it's too much.

***The plate is full.***

Keith's sense of frustration was evident because all of these extra things that limited the amount of time that he could spend working directly with his students fostering those positive learning opportunities for student success. When asked to provide a specific example he added:

Implementing a new curriculum that isn't 100% written and doesn't have the resources yet, or the textbooks haven't been written yet that they have on their approved resource list; it sends teachers into a tizzy. It's like, you expect me to teach this but you don't

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<sup>6</sup> The Hub is a community based service model providing immediate coordinated and integrated responses through mobilization of existing resources to address situations facing individuals, families or environments with acutely elevated risk factors, as recognized across a range of service providers such as police, fire, health, education, social services and other agencies.

have your ducks in a row yet? Like it doesn't make any sense and it becomes a point, I shouldn't say all teachers, but a lot of them end up feeling; that if you're not going to give me this, and then I'm just going to give the kids busy work because I have to get every-thing else done in order to accomplish that. There are teachers who have been around for numerous years and they've seen tons of different initiatives over the years. For example, 'whole part reading' or the dropping of phonics and then reinstating phonics, or that the whole part reading is not going to be an option anymore. They've seen the trends and the ebb and flow of change so much that they just want to get into their classrooms and follow the routine that they know works.

This sense of frustration will have an impact on both the effectiveness of the teacher and thus on the learning of the students, "it's very important that we manage these initiatives so that quality teaching and student success are taking place," he said.



## **Chapter 5**

### **Summary, Findings and Reflections**

#### **Summary of the Stories**

Each of the participants enjoyed a similar experience in their education and upbringing. They attended elementary school, high school, and university in sequence without long gaps between these experiences. However, during the conversations it became quite clear that each of the participants had experienced their story in unique ways. The data analysis showed that there were certain things that they all had in common. One was a strong desire to make a difference; also, the participants indicated that they had something to offer to the students with whom they worked. When attempting to make a difference in the lives of the students, they recognized that while many of their students faced issues outside of school, teachers could create an environment in their classroom that was safe and challenging for the students. Each participant also indicated that they needed to build authentic relationships with their students, their students' families, and if possible the community. There was also an acknowledgment of the diverse and changing role of teachers and that it is important for teachers to be a positive role model for their students.

Making a difference in the lives of the students was important to the participants. They approached this from a genuine desire to help students gain success and have a positive experience at school. In order to be successful, students and particularly Aboriginal students in the lives of these teachers needed the school to be a form of sanctuary from the challenges of everyday life. Debbie put it best when she stated:

they know the school, and if there are things happening outside the school it's off limits for any of the bad stuff to happen if there is anything going on. It's like school's the safe haven and it's a good place to be. It seems to be recognized as that by not only the staff and students but by the community as well. (D. Adams, personal

communication, December 22, 2012).

Each of the participants indicated that being in their current positions for more than one or two years has not only helped in building the relationships with individual students but also with the families and communities. Being a positive role model is a major part of this, but the participants indicated that for many students, just knowing that the teacher will be there over time is a comfort. Through the process of the interviews what struck me as being significant was the compassion with which the participants spoke about their students. Certainly, over the years students would come and go through their classroom doors. But, there were some students who made a lasting impression, who touched the teachers' lives just as much as the teachers touched theirs.

The major factor, according to the participants, was a willingness to treat the students with respect, to expect the same from these students as they would from non-Aboriginal students. They really didn't talk at all about the curriculum, whether it was good, bad, or culturally appropriate or anything like that. Rather they concentrated their discussion on making a difference in their students' lives, on creating an environment that was safe, nurturing, and challenging for all, on building authentic relationships with the students, and being a positive role model.

### **Making a Difference**

Mary and Debbie both expressed that when they were young they knew they wanted to be teachers. Certainly the paths they took were different, but the result has been remarkably similar. At the time of this study they were working and have worked at schools and with students where they believe their efforts have made differences in the students' lives. It may be something as simple as the student knowing the teacher would be there and that when they, the students, are

there they are made to feel good. When this happens the students will make the effort to be successful. It does mean that that they will possibly have a better life for being in that class and working with that teacher than they otherwise might have. Perhaps this is the whole idea behind the current movement in Saskatchewan Education to a model called Student First, which in essence is simply revitalizing the School<sup>Plus</sup> Model and adapting to the needs, demands and realities of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century (Carr-Stewart, 2007; Trilling & Fadel, 2009).

Debbie's experience at school was very positive. She said that she enjoyed everything about school, from the academics to the social activities to sports. It was her desire to provide younger children with the opportunity to enjoy school in the same way that she had that ultimately led her to Education and to become a teacher.

Mary on the other hand found school to be a challenge. It was not until she herself was at university that her previously undiagnosed learning disability was discovered. Although this discovery allowed her to complete her university training and begin her teaching career on a positive note, it didn't change the fact that her elementary school, high school and early attempts at university were both challenging and frustrating. She realized early on that she wanted to become a teacher so that she could work with young children and help them so that they wouldn't have to experience the same hardships she had experienced.

The children that the participants identified in their examples were basically ordinary kids. As with other children in general, many in the group were often shy or withdrawn, had achievement gaps in their learning, as well as had experienced to some extent more frustration than success at school, but despite this the teachers had observed all or many of their students making progress. These teachers have gone a long way to dispel one of major educational myths that were identified in the literature review: that Aboriginal students are less capable than white-

students; that Aboriginal and First Nations students are not capable of achieving academic success; and, that they are not worth the effort required to allow them to be successful (Antone, 2003; Battiste, 2013; Carr-Stewart, 2001; Goulet, 2001; St. Denis, 2007).

### **Safe and Challenging Environment**

The participants also felt that rather than lowering standards and expectations for students, these should be kept to a high level and the students given the opportunity to develop the skills and abilities necessary to reach these standards. It is also necessary for teachers to be aware of the learning styles that Aboriginal students bring to the classroom (Doige, 2003; Battiste & Henderson, 2009). Therefore, the classroom needs to be holistic in nature where there is a recognition of the culture, language, and heritage of the students. As well, further training, through Professional Development or Adult Learning opportunities needs to be available for the teachers. We need to move beyond the concept of trying to get students to change to fit the system. The focus needs to be on making changes to the system. Perhaps, we've reached the point where a new model of education is needed before Aboriginal students can feel truly safe and afforded the opportunity to reach their full potential (Battiste, 2013).

### **Authentic Relationship Building**

Relationship building was mentioned by all of the participants as being vital to having a successful experience when working with any student, but especially with Aboriginal students. The research has shown (Antone, 2003; Battiste, 2013; Carr-Stewart, 2001; Chisholm, 1994; Goulet, 2001; St. Denis, 2007) that many students and particularly Aboriginal students come to school with the possibility of facing many obstacles. It is the teacher's role to help these students be successful despite these obstacles. This involves building up their self-confidence and their skill levels. It doesn't necessarily mean that these students are incapable of being successful

students, but rather that these obstacles for many may seem insurmountable. Each of the candidates mentioned that it is necessary to get to know the students on a personal level. This shows them that you care, that they are important.

The participants also recognized the role that the families play in the student's education as a very important contributing factor to the student's success. Each observed that while the families of many of the children they taught and/or coached may not have been actively present at the school there was always a sense that they valued education but in different ways. The mere fact that many parents went to the effort to drive their children some distance to get them to school sent the message that they valued the education their children were getting. For the participants, it seemed as if it were enough that the parents encouraged their children to attend school and provided them with the opportunity to do so. As we move forward, we may continue to see more and more Aboriginal students remaining in school or returning to school, and pursuing post-secondary education. The following words from Nelson Mandela (2012) resonate clearly in this growing trend: "education is the most powerful weapon you can use to change the world" (p. 101).

While the academic work that is done in the classroom is extremely important, it is not the only thing of value that goes on in school. The participants all expressed the important role that extra-curricular activities, particularly sports, can have in providing a positive school experience for students. Debbie, Cory, and Keith enjoyed participating in school sports programs when they were students in elementary and high school. This success added to their enjoyment of school and helped form their ideas that extra-curricular activities, particularly sports, are important. Participation in such activities allows students the opportunity to be part of a team: to

learn commitment, responsibility, and the opportunity to develop a positive self-concept (Neylan, 2014; Halas, McRae & Petherick, 2012; Bloomfield & Barber, 2011).

Teaching can be a transient profession. People will take new positions, for a variety of reasons, some positive and some negative. The more isolated the community, the more transient the teachers may be. This is particularly a problem for northern communities as well as rural communities in the south (Kitchenham & Chasteauneuf, 2010; Malloy & Allen, 2007; Dove, 2004). It is rare for teachers who are not from those communities to remain in them for long. Each of the candidates had an experience in either a northern or rural community where they remained for only 1-5 years. Yet, they have been in their current positions for 7-10 years. Again, the reasons may vary, but the result is the same. If teachers remain in a school for multiple years there is an opportunity for them to develop many positive relationships and thus be an important constant in many of their students' lives (Hellsten, McIntyre, & Prytula, 2011; Oskineegish & Berger, 2013).

### **Positive Role Model**

Longevity in a community also leads to an additional role that many teachers take on when they work with Aboriginal and First Nations Students. Often, the children are from single parent families, families that are transient in nature, have been transplanted to a different community while their parents pursue work or educational opportunities, or face other challenges (Goulet, 2001). Consequently, the teachers may be an additional or the only constant that these students have in their lives. The same holds true for students living in isolated communities whose families are not transient. The teacher can often provide a perspective that the students may otherwise not be able to obtain. The teaching experience in an isolated community offers a unique role with which each of the participants identified. Such a role may serve as the catalyst

to encourage the parents to take an active role in their children's life at school. The role may also involve teachers as a surrogate parent. Perhaps most importantly, the participants in this study each recognized that they are in a position where they must act as positive adult role models for the children. Cory and Keith felt that it was important to take on the responsibility of being a positive male role model for these students. Cory said:

it goes back to my first point that, that I find that's probably one of the most important things is, with these kids anyway is they need you as an adult figure.

He didn't have that in his family so more than a positive role model a parental figure.

I value that part of my job more, the relationships that I can influence and build or mold with these students. It's not about being the best science teacher but being the best person. (C. Cardinal, personal, communication, December 15, 2012)

## **Findings**

### **Teacher Education**

It became clear in the discussions and confirmed by my own experience and the research that pre-service programs prepared teachers for teaching. They learned how to plan, how to develop a lesson, how to deliver a lesson, and how to assess student learning. There was, however, a sense that the participants did not feel that they were as prepared as they could have been for the realities of living and working in diverse communities. Unfortunately, no formal data was collected on this topic, which may indicate that further study is needed in this area.

It didn't seem to matter if the communities were northern, rural, or urban; if they were communities that the teachers did not grow up in then there was that ever present sense of being an outsider. A potential means of breaking these barriers is through awareness. Teacher education programs are adapting their curriculum so that their programs can provide

opportunities for teachers to gain this experience. An effective means of accomplishing this is through community-based teacher education programs. These programs may be found in inner-city, rural, or northern locations (Barley, 2009; Hesch, 1999; Harrison, Lautensach & McDonald, 2012; Kitchen & Hodson, 2013).

A positive step in Saskatchewan would be to have all undergraduate education students spend time working with Aboriginal and First Nations students. These should be required in each year of the undergraduate program, providing a variety of experiences, urban, rural, and northern. This student teaching experience should not be limited to schools located close to the university that have Aboriginal and First Nations students. It should include the opportunity for the pre-service teachers to spend a significant amount of time living in First Nations communities and working at the local schools. This would mean that the universities, school divisions, First Nations communities, and education authorities would have to work together to establish and monitor such a program.

The Saskatchewan Education Sectoral Strategic Plan (2014) has identified the enduring goals of culturally relevant and engaging curriculum and, culturally appropriate and authentic assessment. In-service professional development is currently being driven by this plan. Attendance and participation for teachers in professional development activities is required in the areas of literacy, numeracy, and formative assessment. Unfortunately, participation in workshops on Treaty Education and Treaty Catalyst Teacher Training is often voluntary. This has direct impact on teachers and students. While Treaty and Land-based Education initiatives are important pieces of the puzzle, they must become engrained in the plan and not left as optional stand alones. The inclusive teacher preparation programs, the TEP (Teacher Education Programs) found in Saskatchewan, NORTEP (Northern Teacher Education Program), SUNTEP



(Saskatchewan Urban Native Teacher Education Program), and ITEP (Indian Teacher Education Program) in particular are graduating Aboriginal Educators. This is impacting the demographics of the teaching force in Saskatchewan, but change in terms of Aboriginal teachers for Aboriginal school populations will take time. In the meantime, the majority of teachers who are currently teaching in classrooms, running specialized programs, providing leadership at the school-based level or who are currently in pre-service teacher education programs will continue to be non-Aboriginal.

### **Cultural Responsiveness**

Although Keith indicated that while he didn't have a cultural or racial difference with the rural communities he worked in, he did find that certain values the community held were different from his. As long as he was willing to spend time with the students, outside of the classroom, coaching various sports teams, he felt welcomed in both the community and the school. He wasn't so sure that these values were held for other teachers who were new to the community or didn't get involved in extra-curricular activities. Yet, he knew that he was an outsider.

Working in the northern First Nations community, both Cory and Mary admitted there was an acceptance of them but only to a point. They were welcomed at community events and were invited to participate, however each said that they were aware of the cultural and racial differences between themselves and the community. They didn't feel that it was a barrier to acceptance, but the acceptance went only so far. That may have been due to cultural differences, but it may also have been due to other factors. Acceptance is based on understanding and compassion. The Capacity Building Series (2013) described this: "Therefore, in an effort to know their students, culturally responsive educators work to build strong relationships with their

students' families. They promote mutual respect between home and school and embrace a collaborative approach to teaching and learning” (p. 5).

The Capacity Building Series (2013) addresses the need for a modern definition of culture: Culture goes much deeper than typical understandings of ethnicity, race and/or faith. It encompasses broad notions of similarity and difference and it is reflected in our students' multiple social identities and their ways of knowing and of being in the world. In order to ensure that all students feel safe, welcomed, and accepted, and inspired to succeed in a culture of high expectations for learning, schools and classrooms must be responsive to culture. (p. 1)

It would seem then that the time is right for education to formally embrace the ideals set forth in culturally responsive pedagogy. Accordingly, “Culturally responsive pedagogy is not about ‘cultural celebrations,’ nor is it aligned with traditional ideas around multiculturalism. It involves careful acknowledgement, respect and an understanding of difference and its complications” (p. 2).

### **Teacher Effectiveness**

The participants provided interesting insights when asked to discuss teacher effectiveness and if they felt that they were effective teachers. Although the details varied between the participants each felt that an effective teacher had to be willing to invest the time in developing a positive relationship with the students. This relationship can be said to have many dimensions, some of which may include the following: spending time with the students outside of the classroom, but in the school; coaching an extra-curricular team, leading a club, facilitating an activity; or just having a conversation with them in the hallway. Just as important is being visible to the students outside or away from the school. Saying ‘Hi’ to them when you run across them,

asking them what they did or are going to do on the weekend, and if possible, attending an activity or function that they are involved in, are all very important. The essential element here is that teachers are sending a very clear message to the student that they genuinely care about the student. The research shows and the participants confirm that if the students know their teacher and thus their school, care about them and value them as individuals, the student is more likely to attend regularly, put forth a better effort when they are present, obtain higher results and thus have a much more positive school experience (Walker, 2008; Walls, Nardi, von Minden, & Hoffman, 2002; Goulet, 2001).

Effective teachers also set high but reasonable standards and expectations for their students. They make these perspectives known to the students and then help to provide the students with the skills necessary to obtain the expected results within a reasonable time frame.

Walker (2008) provided a list of twelve descriptive statements that offer a glimpse into what makes an effective teacher. These twelve characteristics include being prepared, a positive attitude, holding high expectations, being creative, being fair, displaying a personal touch, cultivating a sense of belonging, being compassionate, having a sense of humour, respecting students, forgiving, and being able to admit mistakes. Through the conversations it appeared that each of the participants possessed many of these characteristics, albeit to varying degrees. While the participants were hesitant to describe themselves as outstanding teachers, they seemed to feel comfortable with the notion that they did possess the characteristics of effective teachers. When asked to describe what they felt was an effective teacher or an effective classroom, the picture that they painted felt more like a self-portrait than an unobtainable ideal.

Goulet (2001) identified many characteristics of effective teachers of Aboriginal students and then stated, “effective Aboriginal education addresses issues of culture and language,

community values and norms, and power relations. In addition to the above areas, effective Aboriginal education also needs to include the impact of historical and ongoing oppression of Aboriginal peoples” (p. 70). Mary and Cory addressed this when they were teaching and living in the North by participating in community based activities, having conversations with elders, and listening to what they were told. Debbie and Keith’s current schools, while not in a First Nations community, are located in neighborhoods with large Aboriginal populations. Through conversations with their students, families, and community members, they too were able to address many of the issues identified by Goulet.

### **Final Reflections**

Continuing Education and Professional Development efforts are necessary for the ideals of culturally responsive pedagogy and effective practices of Aboriginal education to be fully implemented into today’s classroom. This in part may account for the fact that throughout the conversations, there wasn’t that much talk about cultural sensitivity or language loss or Treaty education. I’m not sure if that was deliberate, but it certainly begs further investigation. This doesn’t mean that the participants were unaware of their students’ diverse backgrounds; quite the contrary, they seemed to be keenly aware of their students’ backgrounds and in many cases were able to get a feel for the students’ lived experiences outside of the classroom. Perhaps what it simply means is that there is a need for further education and the opportunity for self-reflection.

Each of the participants had a strong sense of the many challenges facing their students. While they had an opportunity to actively intervene when the students experienced the effects of these issues during the school day or afterschool activities, there was very little they could do when the challenges took place outside of the confines of the school, school building, or school sponsored activities. The participants seemed to understand the students’ situation, respond to it

in a kind, caring, and compassionate way, but at the same time they tried hard to not let these social challenges become excuses for poor performance.

Goulet (2001) stressed that there is a uniqueness that teachers must be aware of and respect, when they are working with Aboriginal students. I believe what Goulet is describing as effective teaching of Aboriginal students is very similar to the work that Ladson-Billings did with African American children in the United States. Clearly, both of these ideas can be woven into a Culturally Responsive Pedagogy as described by Villegas and Lucas (2002): that all students learn differently and that these differences may be connected to background, language, family structure, and social or cultural identity.

The opportunity to conduct this study, to review the literature, interview the participants, and review all of the information that I've been exposed to has made me realize that it may not matter at what point in one's career path a teacher is at. The process of developing the skills of an effective teacher should begin during pre-service training and continue with ongoing professional development.

I've found that the participants in this study have confirmed this lifelong career journey. Each of them has made a commitment to their profession. They work hard to do the very best they can for their students. They expect a lot of themselves and of their students. When these expectations are not met they hold themselves and their students accountable; when they are met they celebrate that success and move towards new goals. They also showed an understanding of the unique lived experiences that their students bring to the classroom environment. Thus, the efforts and commitment shown by the teachers in this study may have directly influenced the success of individual Aboriginal students who have passed through their classrooms. At the same time there are many students, including Aboriginal students, who have not experienced success

within the current educational model. As long as the educational model requires any group of students to conform to an inflexible and unresponsive system, the model will remain an artificial construct that will leave them marginalized (Battiste, 2013; Robinson, 2010). The following words from Battiste (2013) provide a framework for change:

Teaching is the unlimited potential of practical problem solving and the transmission of knowledge and values. It is creating a path of practices of learning and innovation, depending on skills and cooperation. Teaching is the psychology of hope, and hope is a cause and a consequence of action. It prefers participation to observation, and it believes that vast problems can yield to several small solutions. Teaching creates the infrastructure of the art of the impossible. (p. 175)

There remains work to be done in the area of developing a curriculum and ultimately a system that is designed to be inclusive for all students, that honours their diversity and ultimately allows them the opportunity to be successful.

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**Appendix A  
Participant Consent Form**

***Participant Consent Form***

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**Research Participant Information and Consent Form**

**Title:** "What patterns, trends, and issues can be found within the stories of non-Aboriginal teachers working with Aboriginal students?"

**Name of Researchers:**

Geraldine Balzer, Ph.D., Professor, College of Education, University of Saskatchewan

E. Paul Heselwood, M.Ed Student, College of Education, University of Saskatchewan

**Introduction:** You are invited to participate in a research study.

This study will explore issues such as, what patterns, trend, and issues can be found within the stories of non-Aboriginal teachers working with Aboriginal students? In order to explore the nuances of teacher education in relationship to the needs of diverse students, other questions need to be addressed. How might pre-service teachers be better prepared to meet the needs of diverse Aboriginal students and, what are some of the major social justice issues that teachers need to address in order to be both successful and effective when working with Aboriginal students?

If you decide to be a part of this study, it is important for you to understand what the research involves. This consent form will tell you about the study, why the research is being done, what will happen during the study and the possible benefits, risks and discomforts. If you wish to participate, you will be asked to sign this form. Your participation is entirely voluntary, so it is up to you to decide whether or not to take part in this study. If you do decide to take part in this study, you are free to withdraw at any time without giving any reasons for your decision and your refusal to participate will not affect your relationship with any of the researchers. Please take your time to read the following information carefully and, if you choose, discuss it with your family and friends before you decide.

### **Purpose of the Study:**

The purpose of this research is to consider the balance between pre-service preparation and the practical demands of today's classroom. This study will examine these issues from the perspectives of experienced non-Aboriginal teachers who have been successful working with Aboriginal students. It will not be confined to merely looking at working with First Nations students in isolated, northern, communities, but will examine the issues teachers face in an urban school as well. The focus will be on determining if there are key indicators that will allow teachers, new or experienced, to work effectively and experience success with any Aboriginal student regardless of where the classroom is located.

Approximately 4-6 teachers will be involved in this study.

### **Possible Benefits of the Study:**

The data gathered will focus on the perspectives of teachers. These teachers will be interviewed and the data collected will be analyzed to determine common issues in their stories. These issues will provide insight into which characteristics and attributes are necessary to maximize the opportunity for success and effectiveness.

### **Procedures:**

If you agree to participate in this study, the following will happen:

- i. You will be contacted by the student researcher to arrange a convenient time for us to get together for a short visit. This initial visit will focus on the project, and your role in it. It will give us a chance to get to know each other and should be completed in 30-60 minutes
- ii. A second, formal interview will be scheduled, again at a convenient time and location. During this interview the Interview Question Guide will be used to initiate the discussion and guide the flow of conversation. This interview should be completed in 2-3 hours.
- iii. You should be aware that there may be up to six participants in this research project. Once the individual interviews have been completed you will be invited to participate in a Group Interview with the other participants. During the Group Interview I will undertake to safeguard the confidentiality of the discussion, but cannot guarantee that other members of the group will do so. Please respect the confidentiality of the other members of the group by not disclosing the contents of this discussion outside the group, and be aware that others may not respect your confidentiality.
- iv. Each of the interviews will be recorded. Once the transcription has been completed you will be contacted and asked to review the transcript for accuracy.
- v. Once the study is complete you will be provided with a copy.

**Foreseeable Risks, Side Effects or Discomfort:**

This study is deemed as low risk. There may be some emotional discomfort if past experiences are negative in nature.

**Confidentiality:**

The data from this research project will be published and presented at conferences; however, your identity will be kept confidential. Although we will report direct quotations from the interview, you will be given a pseudonym, and all identifying information (such as the name of the school, school division, community, teaching assignment, etc.) will also be given pseudonyms or removed from the report.

**Right to Withdraw:**

During the interview process you have the right to refuse to answer any individual question.

Once the interviews have been transcribed you will be given an opportunity to review the document for accuracy. At this time any direct quotations may be removed. After this it may not be possible to withdraw your data.

**Contact:**

Any questions regarding your rights as a participant may be addressed to that committee through the Research Ethics Office at 306-966-2975 or toll free at 888-966-2975.

If you have any questions about the study, or about what you are doing in the study, you may ask the person who is conducting the study.

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**By signing below, I confirm the following:**

- I have read the research subject information and consent form and I understand the contents of this form.
- I have had sufficient time to consider the information provided and to ask for advice if necessary.
- I have had the opportunity to ask questions and have had satisfactory responses to my questions.
- I understand that all of the information collected will be kept confidential and that the result will only be used for research objectives.
- I understand that my participation in this study is voluntary and that I am completely free to refuse to participate or to withdraw from this study at any time without changing in any way the quality of services from the university and the school board.
- I understand that I am not waiving any of my legal rights as a result of signing this consent form.
- I understand that there is not guarantee that this study will provide any benefits to me.
- I have read this form and I freely consent to participate in this study.
- I will receive a dated and signed copy of this form

If you decide you want to be in this study, please sign your name.

I, \_\_\_\_\_, want to be in this research study.  
(Print your name here)

\_\_\_\_\_  
(Sign your name here)

\_\_\_\_\_  
(Date)

If under 18 years of age, consent needs to be given by a parent or guardian.

Parent/Guardian (printed): \_\_\_\_\_

Parent/Guardian Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_



**Appendix B  
Consent for Release of Transcript**

**DATA/TRANSCRIPT RESEASE FORM**

GENERAL INFORMATION

I appreciate your participation in my research study. I have made a written transcription of our interview. I am returning the transcriptions for your perusal and the release of confidential information. I will adhere to the following guidelines which are designed to protect your confidentiality and interests in the study.

1. Would you please read and recheck the transcripts for accuracy of information. You may add to or clarify the transcripts to say what you intended to mean or include additional comments that will be your words. You may also delete any information that you may not want to be quoted in the study.
2. The interpretations from this study will be used in a thesis and scholarly journal articles or other similar publications and presentations. You will be represented by a pseudonym in the thesis and in all publications and presentations.
3. In accordance with the University of Saskatchewan Guidelines on Behavioral Ethics, the recordings and transcriptions made during the study will be kept in a locked file until the study is complete. The tapes and transcripts will be stored in a secure place by the principal investigator, E. Paul Heselwood, until the completion of the study. From this time on, Dr. Geraldine Balzer will store the data in a locked office at the University of Saskatchewan for five years. After that time the recordings will be destroyed.
4. Participation in the study is voluntary, and you may withdraw at any time without penalty. If this happens, the tape recordings and interview data will not be used.

**AUTHORIZATION OF RELEASE**

“I, \_\_\_\_\_, have reviewed the complete transcript of my personal interview in this study. I acknowledge that the transcript accurately reflects what I said on \_\_\_\_\_ in my personal interview with E. Paul Heselwood. I hereby authorize the release of this transcript to E. Paul Heselwood to be used in the manner described in the consent form. I have received a copy of this Data/Transcript Release Form for my own records.”

**SIGNATURES**

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Participant

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of E. Paul Heselwood  
Researcher

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

**Appendix C**  
**Sample Letter to School Divisions**

Department of Curriculum Studies  
College of Education  
University of Saskatchewan

\_\_\_\_\_, 2012

\_\_\_\_\_, Director  
\_\_\_\_\_ School Division

\_\_\_\_\_, Saskatchewan  
\_\_\_\_\_

Dear \_\_\_\_\_,

I am currently a M.Ed. candidate at the University of Saskatchewan. With your permission and her consent, I wish to work with \_\_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_\_ from \_\_\_\_\_ School.

My research will focus on the experiences of teachers working with Aboriginal students. Further, what are some of the major social justice issues that teachers need to address in order to be both successful and effective when working with Aboriginal students. The reality of today's classroom in Saskatchewan will be considered. Some consideration will be given to determining the standards necessary that will allow teachers, new or experienced, to work effectively and experience success with Aboriginal students.

The research will involve conversational interviews with the teachers. These interviews will take place outside of the regular school day so that no student contact time will be lost. Pseudonyms will be used for the school and the teacher and every effort will be made to guarantee anonymity and confidentiality. The school board will be supplied with a copy of the research report.

Permission to conduct this research has been granted by the University of Saskatchewan Behavioral Research Ethics Board on \_\_\_\_\_, 2012. A copy of the letter of permission is appended.

Should you have any questions concerning the research, please feel free to contact my supervisors or me.

E. Paul Heselwood  
236-8445

Geraldine Balzer  
966-6920

Yours sincerely,

E. Paul Heselwood

## Appendix D Semi-Structured Interview Questions

### *Teacher Interview: Questions to Guide Discussion*

The following are designed to provide direction to the conversation that will take place during the interview. They contain a combination of both open- and closed- ended discussion topics.

General Topics:

- **Background**
  - where did you grow up
  - briefly describe your family
- **Elementary / HS Education**
  - Were there defining events that happened during these years that moved you towards your career choice.
  - what was the organization and size of your school(s) (K-8, K-12, 9-12, etc.).
- **University Education**
  - Where did you attend university? Was it close to home or further away?
  - What made you choose that particular university?
  - Did you go directly from high school to university? Did you take other breaks from your studies?
- **Work History**
  - Did you work while going to school?
  - Did you enjoy the work? If you left the work, why?
- **Teacher Education**
  - What made you choose to attend teachers college?
  - What were the things that you felt well prepared for when you began your teaching career?
  - Are there areas that you were less prepared for?
- **Teaching Career**
  - Describe your teaching career so far.
  - How would you define an effective teacher? Do you consider yourself to be one?
  - Identify some successes and challenges that you've experienced as a teacher.
- **Experiences: Life Experiences while teaching/living in different communities**
  - Describe the communities that you've lived in while teaching.
  - Identify some positive and negative experiences while being a part of the larger community around your school.