



- Songs of the Spirit -

Attending to Aboriginal Students' Emotional and Spiritual Needs

Through a Native American Flute Curriculum

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By

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## ABSTRACT

This narrative inquiry explores how the “*Songs of the Spirit*” Native American Flute curriculum, a culturally-responsive curriculum which involves learning to make and play a PVC version of the Native American Flute while learning the cultures and histories of this First Nations instrument, impacted spiritual and emotional aspects of the learning and lives of Aboriginal students, their families, their parents, and their school community. My research took place at an urban Aboriginal high school in Saskatchewan from January to March, 2006. I conducted recorded conversations with three students, two parents, two teachers, two administrators, two Elders, a former principal, a former school caretaker, an artistic director, and the young woman who inspired the Heart of the City Piano Program, a volunteer driven community piano program for children living in disadvantaged situations, in the fall of 1995. Aboriginal individuals, who have too often been silenced in education and in society (Giroux, 1997; Freire, 1989; Fine, 1987; Greene, 1995 & 1998; Grumet, 1999), were provided with a voice in this research.

Because of the voices of my research participants, I chose to use the Medicine Wheel and Tipi Teachings (Lee, 2006; Kind, Irwin, Grauer, & de Cosson, 2005) as a lens (Greene, 1995) rather than situating my research in a traditional Eurocentric body of literature. Along this journey, I reflected inwards and outwards, backwards and forwards on how my past storied experiences (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000) shaped my teaching practices and way of being in the world today. To better understand the hurt I observed and which was described by research participants as present in the lived lives and circumstances of many Aboriginal people, I moved backward in time as I reviewed the literature on the Residential School experience and gained a deeper sense of the impact of

colonialism on generations of Aboriginal people. This inquiry foregrounded how hearing and playing the Northern Spirit Flute impacted the emotional and spiritual aspects of students' being, and contributed to a process of healing. When participants heard the music, "it [sounded] so eloquent and so spiritual. It [was] almost like the flute [was] weeping," (Onawa Gaho, Recorded conversation, March 17, 2006, p. 5) bringing about "a calmness to the anger that some [Aboriginal students] have" (Sakima Qaletaqa, Recorded conversation, March 15, 2006, pp. 25-26).

The research findings indicate that the "*Songs of the Spirit*" curriculum, in honoring the holistic nature of traditional First Nations cultures and teachings, invites Aboriginal students functioning in "vigilance mode" to attend to their emotional and spiritual needs. They speak to a need for rethinking curricula in culturally-responsive ways, for attending to the importance of the arts in education, and for reforming teacher education. Sound files of the Northern Spirit Flute and selected research conversations have been embedded within the electronic version of this thesis to allow the reader to walk alongside me and share in my research journey.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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I would like to extend my heart-felt thanks to my research partners. I will always cherish the time we spent together. Thank you for sharing your stories, your thoughts and feelings, and each of your unique perspectives on the Songs of the Spirit curriculum. Your words, thoughts, and feelings have enriched my research and my life.

I would like to thank my parents, family, grandparents, friends, communities, teachers, mentors, and Elders for all that you have and continue to teach me. May my ears and heart always be open to new learning.

I would like to acknowledge and thank Russell Wolf for his work in compiling and sharing his vast collection of photos of Native American Flutes from across the continent. I would like to acknowledge the ongoing work of Tim Crawford and Robert Gatliff who continue to amaze me with their incredibly thorough and detailed research on the history of the Native American Flute. Thank you for so generously sharing your work with me so that I may better serve my students.

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I would like to thank my family for the many years of support while I continue to learn how to be a better teacher. To Kathy, Jessica, Luc and Max, I thank you from the bottom of my heart for your patience in sharing your partner/husband and dad with his students and his work. You are the air that I breathe and my reason for being. You are all my inspiration and my true loves! I look forward to giving back to you all that you have given and continue to give to me.

## **DEDICATION**

This thesis is dedicated to all the First Nations, Métis, Inuit, and non-Aboriginal children and youth I have had the pleasure of teaching. You have taught me a great deal more than I could ever hope to teach you. We are the children of those who came before us and the parents and caregivers of those who come after us. How we take care of our children today will shape the many tomorrows that we will share together. May this research help remind us that we are all one people. All my relations.

## PREFACE TO THE ELECTRONIC THESIS

Sound files of the Northern Spirit Flute and selected research conversations have been embedded within the electronic version of this thesis to allow the reader to walk alongside me and share in my research journey. Sound files of music can be heard by clicking on the photos.  Sound files of the selected recorded conversations can be heard by clicking on the icon of the microphone and cassette deck.



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## CHAPTER 1

### Unanswered Questions

Throughout my teaching career, I have strived to enhance my teaching skills as an educator and a music specialist. Part of what has sustained me as a white middle class teacher, an outsider, in a very challenging core neighborhood has been the quest for innovative ways of motivating students to learn. I have been encouraged by the incremental changes I have seen in students through their participation in successful musical learning experiences. Although the initial changes were slow in coming, the personal growth in skills, self-confidence and self-esteem I have observed in students over the past twelve years has been quite astonishing.

In my first year teaching at Westmount Community School, the students were very much in vigilance mode, their protective defenses up to avoid even the slightest chance of putting themselves at risk of making a mistake and being hurt. With each passing year, I witnessed that the number of students willing to perform solos in the music class grew. In fact, by my third year teaching there, I had to deal with the situation where more than one student would want to be “the one” to perform the solo part on a song. It seemed that, through the music learning process, students accepted the possibility they might make a mistake. It became okay and it did not threaten their total concept of self nor how they were perceived by their peers. I began to wonder if music, in and of itself, had this transformative effect on people.

Comments from other players in the drama of school life added to the mounting evidence that something was happening, especially with the senior students who had made their own Northern Spirit Flutes, a PVC version of the Native American Flute. The

school administration recognized the quality of the flute playing and requested that the flute classes perform for various public events held at the school. A parent took the time to tell me how much she enjoyed hearing her grade eight daughter playing the flute at home, especially how it sounded so much better “than those recorders.”

She went on to say, “She’s playing it all the time at home.”

She paused for a moment, then went on to say, “You know, she’s even playing it when she’s in bed and she’s supposed to be sleeping!”

Perhaps the nicest compliment came from Wicasa Langundo<sup>1</sup>, the head custodian at Westmount Community School. At the end of a staff meeting, under “other” items, Wicasa said, “I just want to take a minute to thank Richard for making those flutes with the kids. Instead of pushing each other around in the hallways this week, the grade seven and eights are tooting their flutes. I’ve really noticed a difference.” The recollection of this compliment prompted me to have a research conversation with Wicasa. During our conversation, he spoke of how the flute brought senior students together and changed their outward behavior before supervision started.



What I really saw was at breaks and lunchtime, when at that point where there was no supervision, when the kids were by themselves at lunchtime or even early morning when they first got here, no supervision. They would be sitting in groups entertaining themselves, learning or practicing what you had taught in class. And

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<sup>1</sup> Pseudonyms are being used for research participants, and the name of the school where the research was carried out. Kenneth Charlette, Doug McDonald (Chesmu Akecheta), and Larry Mintlzer (Wicasa, Langundo) chose to allow their names to be known. I have chosen to use the Native American names for Doug and Larry so the reader can have a sense of who they are as people. Wicasa is a Dakota name that means “sage.” It is being used to reflect the enlightened human wisdom with which the caretaker spoke. Langundo is a Native American name that means “peaceful.” This name is being used because it reflects the caretaker’s calm nature and he recognized how the flute brought a peacefulness to the students that then spread throughout the school.

there would just be a whole group of them together and rather than the normal routine of them running haphazardly being children, there they were sitting in little groups practicing, playing their flutes. And it was such a calming effect. I could see it in the kids that they were really into what they were doing. And that's what impressed me the most is that they really cared about what was going on. They sat in their groups and they corrected each other and they'd try again and it just sounded so pretty too. It just echoed through this empty basement. It would just echo through the whole place and it was just such a nice thing ... Down here it would set a mood and I believe that's what it did. It set a tone and that's why I believe it was a real calming thing. I felt it was a very positive something that we needed. And now we don't have it and it is back to the way it was [haphazard with kids running around]. (Wicasa Langundo, Recorded conversation, May 8, 2006, pp.1-2)

Wicasa provided a unique perspective. From his vantage point, he saw students without teacher supervision able "to do their thing," whatever they had the intrinsic desire to do at that given point in time. The fact that they chose to play their Northern Spirit Flutes "rather than the normal routine of them running haphazardly being children" brought forward the thoughts of Chesmu Akecheta<sup>2</sup>, the principal at Westmount Community School. Chesmu spoke of how the introduction of the Northern Spirit Flute helped two grade eight students with a violent history connect to the school in such a positive way that they became trusted student helpers within the same year.

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<sup>2</sup> Chesmu is a Native American word meaning "gritty or witty" and Akecheta is a Sioux word meaning "fighter." These words are being used to reflect the down to earth nature of this principal and how he was always very passionate about fighting for getting the resources necessary to meet the needs of students.



I was particularly interested in watching our senior kids who would not connect in any other way with the school start to connect through the music program and through the flutes that they were building and playing and coming to school basically to do that. The funny thing was the spin off from that was that they were actually getting better marks in the other grades, in the other classes because they were coming to school more often to build the flutes and learn how to play the flutes. . . I was surprised to see the number of kids that were actually coming to all the practices and coming out and playing with all of the, every one of the in-school deals and then I thought okay, what about the out-of-school things and you know are they going to show up for them on the Saturdays and when you had the extra performances. And I have to say I was absolutely shocked to see every one of the kids showed up. . . . And there was one family in particular that I was very concerned about. There was a young lady who was extremely **violent** and had a history of beating up other kids. Older, younger it didn't make any difference she was a very angry young woman. And her cousin lived with her as well in this family. And he wasn't as violent but he was constantly on the wings and getting into trouble as well. And both these kids made their flutes, both of them bought into this program and, as they went through, they played, they showed up to school their marks started to rise and in the end the kids connected to the school to a point that in the end they would come in and sit down in my office and just play the flute while I was doing work and it was just great. And both of them became, I mean, um, from kids that you wouldn't trust at all to kids that we had in the office, working in the office sitting there. I honestly believe that that thing was

due to that program [Songs of the Spirit Curriculum and the Northern Spirit Flutes]. I honestly do. (Chesmu Akecheta, Recorded conversation, April 28, 2006, pp. 1-2)

Chesmu went on to say he had run into Cheveyo's<sup>3</sup> aunt and she had told him that "they are in Calgary now and he still is not only playing the flute, but he is actually creating and writing his own music for it as well" (p. 3). Chesmu felt this student was very much at risk of violence and possibly even suicide. But because he was able to connect within himself and outwardly with others through the flute, Chesmu believed Cheveyo was able to turn his life around. Chesmu said



the fact that they're able to connect with something through that, you just, it I know it sounds kind of out there Richard but I honestly believe that when you are connected with something musical let's say then you have something in common with other musicians and you feel connected to the whole, I don't know, not universe, but the whole people-verse, you know? Because that means you've got something that, where if you talk to another musician or another flute player, you're there and they know, they know what they're talking about. . . we may not see the benefits of this right now but down the road we might. We might see something where if some of these kids get into trouble and they start thinking about, oh I don't know, suicidal things. If they start thinking about doing things that are doing things that are goofy it may just be the drawing card that pulls them back from the edge. . . And I think for Cheveyo, that's what happened. I think he

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<sup>3</sup> Cheveyo is a Hopi word that means "spirit warrior." It is being used for this student because he has changed from putting his energy into fighting to putting it into feeding his spirit through playing and creating on the Northern Spirit Flute.

was headed down the wrong path but because he was able to connect with that . . . you feel this connection to other people through different means. And that is one of the means that I know that Cheveyo used for sure. (Recorded conversation, April 28, 2006, pp. 4-5)

Chesmu is convinced that the Northern Spirit Flute enabled Cheveyo to connect beyond himself, to see himself in *relation* (Kenny, 2002) with those around him and to feel connected to “the whole people-verse,” that which is unseen in a positive way. As I consider the social significance of the research, I wonder how many more students the Songs of the Spirit curriculum might empower to make positive choices? How many more students might be pulled “back from the edge?” With Native American Flute being so well received and accepted by students and staff, I became obsessed with exploring why there is such interest and attraction to the instrument.

### **My Research Puzzle**

Over the course of my teaching career, I intuitively felt that something, both seen and unseen, was taking place when students actively participated in making music. I also recognized that as students got older many of them became more reluctant to actively making music. My belief that making music is an important human experience inspired me to take additional training and seek out new music making opportunities for my senior students. My quest finally led to the greatest success in my teaching career – teaching students how to make and play a PVC version of the Native American Flute while learning the cultures and histories behind the instrument and its people. By making, painting, and learning the history behind the Native American Flute, a new dimension was added to the creative experience. This led me to my research puzzle. I wanted to

inquire into what effect learning how to make and play a PVC version of the Native American Flute via the Songs of the Spirit curriculum had on Aboriginal<sup>4</sup> students, their families, and their school community?

### **Remembering My Own Protective Shell**

When I think of the tough shells that inner city children build around themselves to survive, I am reminded of how my own body and senses automatically reverted to being in vigilance mode when I backpacked through Central America in my early twenties. I remember fearfully surrounding myself with the same kind of protective shell as I traveled through Guatemala and El Salvador, naively trying to get more stamps on my first passport. At first, I did not fully comprehend that both countries were in the midst of civil wars, with soldiers stationed at outposts along the highways leading into the cities. However, I remember with stark clarity the first time I was pulled off a bus by soldiers carrying machine guns on the way from the Mexican border to Guatemala City. Through the incoherent chatter of rapidly shouted Spanish, my vision narrowed until all I could see was the hole at the end of the of a soldier's AK47 machine gun. It was pointing directly at me. Hands raised in the air, my mind raced thinking of potential ways to survive the situation as I was herded off the bus with the rest of the passengers. I thought to myself, "If shooting starts, I'll drop and roll under the bus or I'll drop, roll off the road, then run into the jungle to get out of their sight."

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<sup>4</sup> The word "Aboriginal" encompasses First Nations, Métis, and Inuit people in the Canadian context. Currently, some First Nations, Métis, and Inuit people are wanting to move away from this term because it tends to ignore not only the differences between the aforementioned groups, but also amongst the over 500 First Nations across North American. I use the term in my work not to generalize but to recognize First Nations, Métis, and Inuit people as a distinct group separate from non-First Nations, non-Métis, and non-Inuit people.

Each subsequent time we were pulled over and forced off the bus, I found I was able to gradually widen my vision and see past the end of the barrel of the machine gun. At the next stop, I noticed that the soldier's finger was not on the trigger. At the third stop, I was able to raise my eyes to see that the soldiers were actually smiling and relaxed. By the fourth time we were pulled over, my vision had widened so that I could see all of the soldiers. They were all relaxed, some smiling, some even joking and laughing, none of them having their finger on the trigger of their gun. Somehow, with each stop, I slowly became accustomed to how I was being treated and what was taking place. By the fifth stop, it seemed routine, almost normal. With the innocence of youth on my side, I gained a dangerous sense of self-confidence bordering on invincibility from this experience.

This naïve sense of invincibility gave me the blind courage to step further into the depth of the mid-eighties civil wars of Central America. I found out that it was only seven Quetzals, seven Guatemalan dollars, to get to San Salvador, the capital of El Salvador. My first thought – cheap. This was an extremely inexpensive price to pay to get another stamp on my passport. I planned to make a day trip, quickly in, quickly out, all within one day. This was the first time I hadn't met or spoken with a backpacker returning from the direction I was heading to. That in and of itself should have been enough to set off the alarm bells in my brain. However, feeling the invincibility of youth, I stepped into the jam packed, beaten up, half rusted Volkswagen van for the trip to San Salvador. As the van began climbing the mountainside to leave Guatemala City, I looked back to see an incredibly stunning image. The mist was just beginning to lift as the sun slowly rose over lushly covered green mountains.

The old van didn't even make it to the border. As we were leaving the third small village on our journey, the transmission went, stranding us half way over one of the huge speed bumps we went over while passing through towns. Little did I know that this foreshadowed what was yet to come. Just when I thought this was the end of the journey, our driver flagged down an old, beat up, greyhound bus as it slowly pulled over the speed bump we were stuck on. As our driver negotiated with the bus driver, I started to have very pleasant thoughts of a much more comfortable ride for the next three hours of the trip to San Salvador. Needless to say, I was quite excited as I was guided onto the bus with the rest of the van's passengers. After paying some extra money to the bus driver, I looked to the back of the bus and quickly realized there were no seats left. We continued the journey to "la frontera," the border, standing in the overcrowded public bus. When we got to the border, I discovered that I could not return to Guatemala for 72 hours if I went into El Salvador. The lure of another stamp on my passport was too strong. I made the decision to exit Guatemala. The bus drove to the next area for entry into El Salvador. When I got off the bus and tried to go through immigration, I found my travel Spanish lacking and the accent of the Salvadoran immigration officer impossible to understand. Finally, one of my fellow passengers explained slowly that I needed to go to a small shop to purchase a "sello," a postage stamp that was in-turn "sellado," stamped with the current date. As I ran back to immigration to wait in line for a second time, I noticed that most of the people from my bus had already passed through immigration and were boarding the bus. I began to think the bus would take off without me, leaving me stranded for three days between countries. My heart raced as I inched closer to the front of the line, finally making it through. I grabbed my backpack and quickly rushed to the bus,

leaping onto the first step while simultaneously the bus driver hit the gas to pull away. My heart was pounding frantically as I caught my breath and the driver closed the door.

As other passengers and I jostled on the moving bus for a comfortable place to stand, I brushed up against the basket of one of the sitting passengers only to have a chicken peck at my arm. I jumped back as in the rush of getting on the bus, I hadn't noticed the basket of chickens sitting on what would have otherwise been an empty seat.

I was pleasantly surprised to find out that we weren't being pulled off the bus as we traveled through El Salvador. However, in place of this, there were gun turrets every five to ten kilometers. As we approached each turret, its guns would be automatically trained on our bus, following us as we drove by. I could feel my body tensing. This continued as we passed by a seemingly endless number of check points to San Salvador. I began to feel relieved as we approached San Salvador, believing there would be some kind of sanctuary within the city. As we entered the city, I felt like I had swallowed my heart. The devastation was beyond anything I had ever seen. It was completely frightening! My mind began to race as I looked at the bullet holes in the sides of buildings. Other buildings looked like they had been shot by a tank, with entire walls blown away. Then I received my next free Spanish lesson. "Terremoto" means earthquake. At that moment, stunned and in a daze, I began to have some vague recollection of a news story four weeks prior about an earthquake in El Salvador. In that moment of fear and panic, it struck me - 72 hours! I could not leave El Salvador for 72 hours. As we passed street after street of crumbled buildings and rubble and eventually pulled into what was supposed to be a bus station, I truly feared for my life. My transformation into full vigilance mode, my primary concern survival, was complete.

I managed to connect with the only other “gringo,” white tourist, I saw at the bus depot. Paul was a Born Again Christian who had been to San Salvador before the earthquake. He was also looking for a place to stay and kindly agreed to share a room with me. Paul and I spent the better part of a day walking through the desolate city before we were able to find a hotel that had both electricity and running water. At first, we were almost dissuaded from even checking out Hotel Bruno because of the big pile of concrete and rubble in its front entrance. But when we looked passed the rubble, we saw two big steel doors. It gave us a sense that this might be one of the more secure places we might find amidst the devastation we saw walking throughout the city. As we worked our way around the rubble and made our way through the front entrance, we were pleased to see someone filling a jug with water from a tap. We were ecstatic when we saw a T.V. set on and realized they also had electricity.

It felt like the end for me. For the second time on my trip, I was left not knowing whether I would make it back home alive. That night, as I tried to go to sleep, the images of the young soldiers we had seen on virtually every street corner replayed in my head. I was haunted by the look in their eyes. I could feel their anger and bitterness. There were no smiles. There was no laughter. There was no joking with fellow soldiers. I could sense that each of them would just as soon shoot me as look at me. Every soldier’s finger was on the trigger. For 72 hours, I lived life in an all consuming vigilance mode. All of my senses were heightened. I could feel the tension in every muscle of my body. I became acutely sensitive to everything around me, especially the sound of the double bladed combat helicopters that flew overhead repeatedly throughout the day. The sound of a helicopter disturbed me for years afterwards as it brought me right back to that place, that

time, that moment of sheer panic and fear. I remembered the child soldiers, perhaps nine or ten years old, marching through the dusty streets carrying wooden guns as they trained for battle. By the end of my last day in San Salvador, I came to know in my heart that I too could carry a gun. I too was capable of taking up a side. I too hated the feeling of living in fear. I came to know that the fear in my heart could turn into the anger of survival or revenge. I came to know that given the right circumstance, the right situation – I too was capable of doing things, unthinkable things, only days before I had never imagined possible.

Retelling this story made me realize how profoundly I was affected by those three days in San Salvador. The images of whole buildings totally flattened, bodies being pulled out of the Hotel San Salvador a month after the earth quake, the hate filled eyes of soldiers standing guard on the street corners, seeing a finger caressing the trigger of a machine gun while a hate-filled soldier stared at me, and the haunting sound of the large combat helicopters were emblazoned into my memory forever. It helped me to comprehend why I find it so easy to empathize with how and why people might function given the different circumstances they find themselves in.

In turning my thinking outwards, I found myself almost shrinking with embarrassment. I spent 72 hours, three days, in vigilance mode in order to survive my time in El Salvador. I realized I've got a lot of nerve expecting children, who have been traumatized and put into vigilance mode from seeing family or neighborhood violence over the course of months and years, to come to school and conform to the way I want to run my music class. I was left perplexed, when I thought about how or if they can ever recover from such experiences. I was left again to replay the scenes and retell the stories

of my first hand experiences teaching for ten years in a core neighborhood school that caused me to puzzle over how the “Songs of the Spirit” curriculum was impacting students. In my research, I continued to look for new meaning or teachings to be learned from “the school of life” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). I’m thankful I was re-sensitized and reminded to take a walk in someone else’s moccasins, to “look through the eyes of others” (Greene, 1995) who have too often been “silenced,” and to feel and experience life from a different “vantage point” (p. 112). This is the story of my walk alongside Aboriginal research participants, of seeing through their eyes and their voices, of following pathways into and out of the literature using the frame of Indigenous epistemology, and of thinking backward and forward about how the emotional and spiritual needs of Aboriginal students can be attended to through the “Songs of the Spirit” curriculum.

### **Thesis Overview**

My thesis is organized to give you the opportunity to feel you have walked alongside me in my life’s journey, to have shared in many of the experiences that have shaped who I am as a person, a husband, a partner, a father, a musician, a researcher, and a white middle class music teacher. It is my hope that these stories have an authentic “explanatory, invitational quality” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 185) and that they will bring forward for you your own lived stories so they, too, can be told, retold in educative ways, and perhaps lived out in the future differently than in the past. Throughout the course of this inquiry, the Songs of the Spirit curriculum, including learning how to make and play the Northern Spirit Flute, is the thread that weaves in and out of the work, holding it together as it has on my teaching journey. Chapter 2 takes you

into the lived lives of many First Nations, Inuit, and Métis people. This overview of the lived history of so many Aboriginal people helps explain why I believe it is becoming increasingly more important to work towards positively impacting the emotional and spiritual aspects of our young people. In Chapter 3, I share my own narrative account, background, and history that continues to impact how I live and how I teach. I tell the story of how and why I developed programs to better meet the needs of my students. Chapter 4 helps to explain why I have chosen narrative inquiry as my methodology, while at the same time asking what is worth teaching in education. In Chapter 5, I introduce the research setting and participants more clearly, while at the same time reflecting on, from multiple perspectives, what it feels like to be in the minority. Chapter 6 is an exploration of the literature on Medicine Wheel and Tipi Teachings in relation to the research, including the four aspects of being. It reflects my choice of viewing this work through the frame of Indigenous epistemology rather than the more traditional Eurocentric paradigm of research and learning. A more in-depth look is taken at how the Songs of the Spirit curriculum addresses the spiritual aspect of the Medicine Wheel in Chapter 7, while Chapter 8 does the same with the emotional aspect. Chapter 9 summarizes what I have learned from my research, while looking backward and forward, inward and outward, in time and in place. I conclude with some final thoughts, feelings, and unanswered questions which speak to implications for practice and for further research.

## CHAPTER 2

### Significance of the Research

#### *The Lived Landscape – The Apartment*

The apartment was up two flights of garbage-littered stairs, and the whole place smelled of stale food, dirty bodies and mould. Our apartment had a small living room with a broken-down chesterfield that served as our bed, and a few pieces of old dirty furniture. The kitchen was just big enough for a folding table, a hot plate, a sink and an old fridge. The bathroom was down the hall and we shared it with all the other tenants on that floor. I tried my best to clean the place but it made no difference. The kitchen was full of cockroaches which scattered when the light was switched on. Sometimes I had to wait half an hour to use the bathroom. Just waiting was an experience in itself. The most rejected-looking people would be waiting their turns with me. Some tried to be friendly but mostly they were so lost in a world of their own that I doubt if they even saw me. I wondered, as I waited, whether any of them had parents who loved them, or if they had ever laughed, or loved, or hated.” (Campbell, 1973, p. 132)

Maria Campbell’s description of the stark living conditions she was forced to accept hearkens to what I have experienced, to varying degrees, on hundreds of home visits. On one such home visit, I remember reaching to knock on the door to a duplex, because the doorbell had been ripped away leaving exposed wires, and noticing smeared blood stains at the height of my head. I was taken aback and literally stepped back in fearful anticipation of the door opening and what to expect. I calmed myself down by rationalizing that the bloodstains were dry, therefore there should be no immediate danger.

What kind of impact does living in squalor have on a person's psyche? How are the parents affected? How are the children affected? Does it affect children differently depending on their age? At what point do they know this isn't right? When I put myself in the place of the parent, I honestly don't know if I could function or cope half as well as I see people doing. I don't know if I would have the inner strength to make it through day after day. Campbell (1973) asks, "Have you ever watched a man die inside? Children who have grow up fast" (p. 76). How many children living in poverty and substandard housing have to "grow up fast" because they see their mother or father "die inside?" How long is it before they die inside too? How did we get to the point that so many Aboriginal families live their lives "in the shadows of family turbulence" (Ward & Wason-Ellam, 1995, p. 16)? As I went backward in time, I found answers to questions I hadn't even asked.

### **Stolen Children, Broken Spirits – The Residential School Experience**

The tragic legacy of residential education began in the late nineteenth century with a three-part vision of education in the service of assimilation. It included, first, a justification for removing children from their communities and disrupting Aboriginal families; second, a precise pedagogy for re-socializing children in the schools; and third, schemes for integrating graduates into the non-Aboriginal world.

Put simply, the residential school system was an attempt by successive governments to determine the fate of Aboriginal people in Canada by appropriating and reshaping their future in the form of thousands of children who were removed from their homes and communities and placed in the care of

strangers. Those strangers, the teachers and staff, were, according to Hayter Reed, a senior member of the department in the 1890s, to employ "every effort...against anything calculated to keep fresh in the memories of the children habits and associations which it is one of the main objects of industrial education to obliterate." Marching out from the schools, the children, effectively re-socialized, imbued with the values of European culture, would be the vanguard of a magnificent metamorphosis: the 'savage' was to be made 'civilized', made fit to take up the privileges and responsibilities of citizenship. (Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples [RCAP], 1996, p. 5)

I still vividly remember Roland Duquette, Elder at Pleasant Hill Community School, recounting in great detail the story of how he and his siblings were taken away from their parents by the RCMP. He described how the old black and white police car with the cherry, one red light, on top pulled into their yard. One of the officers informed him they were there to take the children away to residential school. When Roland's father vehemently protested, the officer answered with, "If you don't give us the children, we're going to put you and your wife in jail and take the kids anyway!" His parents, left with no way out, allowed Roland, his brothers, and sisters to be forced into the police car. They were taken away to the train station where they were loaded up with other children for the trip to the residential school at Batoche.

Tragically, the future that was created is now a lamentable heritage for those children and the generations that came after, for Aboriginal communities and, indeed, for all Canadians. The school system's concerted campaign "to obliterate" those "habits and associations," Aboriginal languages, traditions and beliefs, and

its vision of radical re-socialization, were compounded by mismanagement and underfunding, the provision of inferior educational services and the woeful mistreatment, neglect and abuse of many children — facts that were known to the department and the churches throughout the history of the school system. (RCAP, 1996, p. 6)

Adults were seen as an “impediment” to the “civilization” of Aboriginal people.

E. Dewdney, superintendent general of Indian affairs in Macdonald's second government, reasoned, children therefore had to be removed from "deleterious home influences"; they must be, the Archbishop of St. Boniface added, "caught young to be saved from what is on the whole the degenerating influence of their home environment." Their parents were, by the light of the vision's compelling logic, unfit.

...In its enthusiasm for the schools, the department went so far as to suggest that it would be "highly desirable, if it were practicable, to obtain entire possession of all Indian children after they attain to the age of seven or eight years, and keep them at schools...until they have had a thorough course of instruction."

...That the department and churches understood the central challenge they faced in civilizing the children as that of overturning Aboriginal ontology is seen in their identification of language as the most critical issue in the curriculum. It was through language that children received their cultural heritage from parents and community. It was the vital connection that civilizers knew had to be cut if progress was to be made. (RCAP, 1996, pp. 8-11)

...The only effective road to English or French, however, and thus a necessary pre-condition for moving forward with the multi-faceted civilizing strategy, was to stamp out Aboriginal languages in the schools and in the children. The importance of this to the department and the churches cannot be overstated. In fact, the entire residential school project was balanced on the proposition that the gate to assimilation was unlocked only by the progressive destruction of Aboriginal languages. With that growing silence would come the dying whisper of Aboriginal cultures. To that end, the department ordered that "the use of English [or French in Quebec] in preference to the Indian dialect must be insisted upon." (p. 12)



Upon reading this, I asked myself, "Who were the savages?" Where was the golden rule that I was brought up to respect and believe in? "Do unto others as you want them to do unto you." As I thought and reflected on the horrors that families had suffered, words Jesus spoke, put to a church hymn, began to play in my head, "Whatsoever you do to the least of my brothers, that you do unto me." Then, with a knot in my stomach, I read on.

Badly built, poorly maintained and overcrowded, the schools' deplorable conditions were a dreadful weight that pressed down on the thousands of children who attended them. For many of those children it proved to be a mortal weight. Scott, reviewing the history of the system for the new minister, Arthur Meighen, in 1918, noted that the buildings were "undoubtedly chargeable with a very high death rate among the pupils."

...It became the stuff of headlines and critical editorial comment. *Saturday Night* concluded that "even war seldom shows as large a percentage of fatalities as does the education system we have imposed upon our Indian wards." The percentage was indeed shocking. Bryce's death toll for the 1,537 children in his survey of 15 schools was 24 per cent, and this figure might have risen to 42 per cent if the children had been tracked for three years after they returned to their reserves. The rate varied from school to school going as high as 47 per cent at Old Sun's on the Blackfoot reserve. Kuper Island school in British Columbia, which was not included in Bryce's sample, had a rate of 40 per cent over its 25-year history. While a few officials and churchmen rejected Bryce's findings and attacked him as a "medical faddist," most had to agree with him, and no less an authority than Scott asserted that, system-wide, "fifty per cent of the children who passed through these schools did not live to benefit from the education which they had received therein." (RCAP, 1996, pp. 29-31)

Students in residential schools received half-day instruction and worked for the other half in "learn-by-doing chores" (RCAP, 1996). The curriculum for boys consisted of education in "agriculture, carpentry, shoemaking, blacksmithing, tinsmithing and printing and, for the girls, sewing, shirt making, knitting, cooking, laundry, dairying, ironing and general household duties. Student labour "made the operation of the institution[s] possible" (RCAP, 1996) as the entire residential school system was grossly under funded. In fact, the school records at Qu'Appelle revealed that "the boys were in class so infrequently that the school had become a "workhouse" (RCAP, 1996).

Throughout the history of the system many children were, as the principal of St. George's testified in 1922, "ill-fed and ill-clothed and turned out into the cold to work" trapped and "unhappy with a feeling of slavery existing in their minds" and with no escape but in "thought."

...Hunger was a permanent reality: the food was often "too meagre"; the fare was not appropriate "neither as to quantity or quality"; the children "were not given enough to eat especially meat"; the food supply was inadequate "for the needs of the children"; the "vitality of the children is not sufficiently sustained from a lack of nutritious food, or enough of the same for vigorous growing children."

The same files carry images of the children that disrupt Hamilton's picture of Sunday downtown dress at Birtle school: "I have never seen such patched and ragged clothing"; their "uniform is so old and so worn out that we do not dare show them to anyone"; the children "are not being treated at all good, nothing on their feet, etc."; the children were "dirty and their clothes were disgraceful"; and "I never had in my school a dirtier, more ill-clad or more likeable class of little folk." (RCAP, 1996, pp. 32- 33)

In addition to being subjected to insufficient food, clothing, and shelter, "Christianity had to supplant the children's Aboriginal spirituality" (RCAP, 1996, p. 10). Mistreated, malnourished, and enslaved, their last refuge from the misery they lived daily, the very foundation of the essence of their people and their own being, was also torn away.

Perhaps the cruelest irony of the residential school legacy is that

neglect was routinely ignored, and without remedial action, it became a thoughtless habit. It was, however, only one part of a larger pattern of church and government irresponsibility writ more starkly in the harsh discipline, cruelty and abuse of generations of children taken into the schools. Here, too, the record is clear. When senior officials in the department and the churches became aware of cases of abuse, they failed routinely to come to the rescue of children they had removed from their real parents or, as they claimed ironically in the case of Category 3, children they had rescued from situations of neglect in communities. (RCAP, 1996, p. 40)

Greene (1995) helps us to see the residential schooling experience both big and small. Seeing small, she says, is seeing things “from a detached point of view, to watch behaviors from the perspective of a system, to be concerned with trends and tendencies rather than the intentionality and concreteness of every day life” (p. 10). Seeing big “brings us in close contact with details and with particularities that cannot be reduced to statistics or even to the measurable” (p. 10). With a clear image of how residential schools operated small, I look big at Mary Isabelle Young’s (2003) personal account of what it was like to have been stolen away from her family:

In June 1967, after being away for ten months, I arrive home from the Pine Creek Residential School. During that time I was not allowed to go home and I was not permitted to speak in *Anishinabe*. The only contact I had with my family was through letters. The letters I wrote to my mother and father were always read and screened before they were mailed, and, whenever their letters arrived, they were always opened and read by the nuns before I was allowed to read them. I longed

to be part of my family; I cannot describe or express how much I missed my family. I will never forget how lonely and homesick I was and I remember crying in bed, in class. As I recollect my feelings from that time, I felt like I was crying all the time. . . . my heart continued to ache and there was an empty feeling in my gut. Something was missing. I did not see beauty anywhere. I didn't have much understanding about anything. I did whatever I was told to do: I ate when I was told to eat; I slept when I was told to sleep; prayed when and how I was told; went to class when I was told; studied when I was told; worked when I was told to do chores; and went outside to play when I was told. Playing usually meant walking around the yard which was fenced. I can still hear the whistle Sister Mary blew to get our attention. We knew as soon as we heard it that we had to start forming a line so we could do things in an orderly Christian and Catholic manner. . . . I continually craved the company of my family, their laughter. I missed having meals with them. . . . I remember the first time I found out by accident that there were two other students at the school who spoke *Anishinabe*. What I recall the most about the incident was not so much being surprised, but I think I was more startled than anything else. Hearing them literally stopped me in my track. I am sure I could not articulate what I was feeling at the time but now as I look back I think I felt a connection, a sense of belonging. It was like a dream. I know someone here, even though I didn't really know them but something awoke my spirit, my being and the language I heard sounded reassuring and soothing. My heart was immediately happy. I had forgotten how long it had been since I had heard my language. It felt good. It felt really good but it also made me lonelier. I

wanted to go home. *(When I think about it now, it was like I had been in another world . . . not knowing who I was; not knowing what I was capable of achieving, not even thinking that I could achieve anything on my own. The students jolted me from a world where I learned to be somebody else. Hearing them took me to a different landscape, in the way Silko (1996) means, home.)*(Young, 2003, pp. 1-4 )

The Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples and Young's personal experience help to give me an understanding of how many of today's social ills have come into being for so many First Nations families. The "empty feeling" in her gut, the fact that she could "not see beauty anywhere," and her longing to be "part of [her] family" are all the kind of emotional imbalances that can set the stage for substance abuse and addictions. The lack of parenting skills for many residential school survivors is the direct result of having not been raised in a family setting. I cannot count the number of times I have heard the words of my mother or father come out of my mouth in the midst of a trying disciplinary situation with my own children. My first instinctive reaction is to imitate how I was treated when I grew up. It comes as no surprise that residential school survivors would likely respond in the way they were treated/parented at residential school.

By contrast, in traditional times, Aboriginal people lived a communal lifestyle where working together was the norm. Discipline was non-violent in nature, as children were looked on as "gifts from the creator" (Naytowhow, Dubé & Brown, 2004, p. 4). Gift giving, sharing, hunting and working together for the common good was the practice. Many First Nations gave help to incoming settlers so they could survive the bitter Canadian winters. Their philosophy was that of "peaceful co-existence" (p. 5). I am struck by the harsh irony of how the government of the day wanted to remove children

from the “deleterious home influences” while it was that very removal and the subsequent treatment and living conditions that was so “uncivilized.”

As the parent of two young school age children, I placed myself in the position of father and tried to envision what it would have been like to have my children taken away. I could barely even begin to imagine the pain, suffering, and loss that one’s heart would feel, even without taking into account that fact that the children were then stripped of their identity; their hair cut and clothes burned; forbidden to speak their language; forbidden to pray in their traditional spiritual way; forced to wear school uniforms that reflected the culture of those in power; disallowed from seeing their parents for ten months or longer; all communication through letters carefully scrutinized. When I allowed myself to imagine what it would be like to go through the experience, I could not help but think the children had been *stolen* from their parents. Their childhood and opportunity to grow up in a loving caring family was *stolen* from each person who attended residential school. It leaves little wonder why so many First Nations people’s spirit was broken and many turned to substance abuse as a way of trying to cope with the suffering, sense of loss, and pain from such a traumatizing experience.

***Summary – Stolen Children, Broken Spirits – The Residential School Experience***

The Aboriginal family structure was decimated during the Residential School Era (Naytowhow, Dubé & Brown, 2004; Young, 2003; Duquette, personal communication, 1998; R.C.A.P. 1996) when children were stolen from their families with the help of the RCMP (Naytowhow, Dubé & Brown, 2004). The subsequent experience at residential school for ten months or longer, where they were stripped of their clothes, their language and their cultural identity (p.6), deepened the wounds that still need to be healed today. Joseph Naytowhow (Personal communication, January, 2004) did not have the

opportunity to get to know his brothers and sisters until he was in his thirties. Although he did not directly experience sexual abuse, he is aware of young Aboriginal boys being assaulted by an order of nuns. For many Aboriginal families, addictions, abuse, family violence and conflict with the law are a legacy that have plagued them for multiple generations. If we as educators understand and accept the reality of the lived experiences of First Nations students and their parents, we will be better equipped to find ways to meet the learning needs of our students. It makes no more sense to keep saying what I have heard come from many mouths (*some even being educators*) in regards to dealing with the many issues facing First Nations people, “Let’s just let the past be the past and start from right now,” than it is for me to walk up, slap you in the face, and then say, “Let’s forget about what just happened and be friends.” Healing needs to take place before we can move forward.

I wonder if some of this healing can come through experiences that touch people in the way that Young described when she felt “a connection, a sense of belonging;” how “something awoke [her] spirit and how hearing her language “sounded reassuring and soothing;” “not knowing who [she] was;” “not knowing what [she] was capable of achieving;” “not even thinking that [she] could achieve anything on [her] own.” I wondered if learning to make and play a Northern Spirit Flute could be an entry point to healing for some of our Aboriginal youth who are still experiencing the generational repercussions of the residential school era. My past experience led me to believe that it could, that there were possibilities yet unexplored, possibilities yet unseen.

### *Invisible*

As I reflected and replayed all the past harm that took place, I began to contemplate what it meant to be invisible to mainstream society. I can only imagine

because I have always been able to see myself in the stories that I read in school, the music instruments I played at school, in television programs, in the news, and in the movies I've seen. Not only could I see myself, I was virtually always able to relate who I was with the hero, virtually always white, who would be fighting the forces of evil, virtually always dark skinned or, at the very least, dressed in black. When I first traveled through Latin America, I was struck by how the television commercials and advertisements featured lighter skinned people in more affluent roles. The expense of the item correlated directly to the skin shade of the actor. The more expensive the item, the lighter the skin of the actor would be. Not even once did I see a commercial that featured an Indigenous actor, let alone a black actor, portrayed driving a new car or in conjunction with other items associated with the society's affluent. Greene (1995) states that the "effect of [society's main text being identified with white middle-class values] on minorities is to make them feel like outsiders and invisible to the dominant culture" (pp. 135-136). After reading the preceding passage by Greene, I was inspired to write the following poem:

***Invisible***

*I teach the children of the forgotten women,  
forgotten because they aren't white or middle class.  
They are the less, if not totally,  
unimportant because they are  
Aboriginal and missing.  
I guess in the eyes of many  
they were already invisible  
even before they went missing.  
So who noticed?*

*I teach the children of those who are imprisoned.*

*I teach the children of those who have been  
swept up in the violence that goes  
hand in hand with poverty and addictions.*

*I teach the children of those who have  
seen that violence,  
have been victimized by that violence,  
and have been killed by that violence.*

*I teach the children who live in  
that violence and dysfunction.*

*I am humbled by the kindness and respect  
that I am afforded from the children  
who have been so forgotten and  
left to be so harmed,  
because,  
like their missing mothers,  
aunties, and sisters,  
they too are  
invisible.*

*(November 12, 2006)*

How often do my students find themselves forgotten and left to be harmed? How often are my students able to identify and connect who they are with the hero or main character of what is being studied or do they too feel invisible? What part does the language of education, the language of the dominant culture, play in making both parents and students feel invisible?

Giroux (1997) states that “[a]s a part of a broader struggle over signs and social practices, language cannot be abstracted from the power of those institutional forces that

use it as part of a systematic effort to silence, exclude, and dictate the voices of subordinate groups” (p. 49). Freire (1989) believes it is incumbent upon us to bring to the forefront the needs of “persons who have been unjustly dealt with, deprived of their voice” (p. 176). Otherwise, the simple use of a certain kind of language or the omission of the use of one’s traditional language and culture will serve to be “merely one more instrument of repression” (Giroux, 1989, p. 50). In the absence of Indigenous language classes, does the Northern Spirit Flute help give Aboriginal students part of their Indigenous voice back?

When I travel backward in time to my first trip through Latin America, I can’t help but think of “the disappeared,” the people who were taken by either government or gorilla forces and never seen again by their families. They were erased, made invisible. Until that trip, that life experience, it was so easy to see the world in black and white, as “them” and “us.” I remember wondering how the governments of the countries I traveled in could allow such horrible things to happen to their own citizens? I returned, my ignorance and arrogance intact, standing on high moral ground pointing my finger out at “them,” First Nations people, still not aware of what had been taking place for decades in my own province and country.

When I traveled on second and third class buses along with the working class people of Mexico, Guatemala, Belize, and El Salvador, I was always in the minority as there would rarely be another white person on the bus, save for the occasional backpacker, like myself. However, I realize now it was a false minority. The color of my skin automatically afforded me a special status. I was a curiosity for the other travelers, as much as they were for me. I was always friendly and courteous as I appreciated every

opportunity I had to learn how to speak Spanish with the help of a couple pocket dictionaries. I found people were receptive when I approached them to speak and they were very patient with me as I fumbled along with my efforts to learn their language. As I look back on this experience now, it seems that people appreciated the fact I made the effort to speak their language, somehow showing an appreciation for their culture and language in this way. I wonder how different our shared history in this province would be had we honored, respected, and accepted the languages of our First Nations peoples. I wonder if the flute can help rebuild the lost connection and allow Aboriginal students to feel they are regaining part of their Indigenous voice.

***Blessed Be Those Who Seek Truth***

*Blessed be those who seek truth through story*

*For they shall inhabit the holy places where*

*Doing and one most often meet.*

*Blessed be those who live with dignity and humor*

*While in the narrative eye of the human storm.*

*And blessed be those who people and tell of the landscapes*

*For they shall inherit themselves. (Ian Sewall, 1996, p. 1)*

Sewall's poem helps me to think in new ways, to be open to new possibilities as I "look through the eyes of others" (Greene, 1995) who have too often been "silenced" and to feel and experience life from a different "vantage point" (p. 112). Too often, students and parents living in core neighborhoods do not receive the opportunity to have their voices heard when it comes to shaping and meeting their educational needs. At times, their voices are silenced by curriculum that does not have any connection to who they are, their culture, their history, or their lived lives (Giroux, 1996; Freire, 1989; Fine,

1987; Greene, 1995, 1998; Grumet, 1999). At other times, they are seen as “unknowing” because “the educators’ expert knowledge of teaching and learning puts them in a superior position over less-knowing parents” (Pushor & Murphy, 2007, in press). My choice of narrative inquiry as methodology is deliberate and well thought out. I believe that narrative inquiry is a rich way to communicate the human experience and to gain a deeper more meaningful understanding of that experience. Like Barone (1998), I believe that “a personal voice does forthrightly convey the sense of human perspective. . . . fashioned by a human mind with certain purposes and inherent emotional qualities” (p. 159).

Teaching in core neighborhood schools is an incredibly emotional journey lived in the “eye of the human storm” (Sewall, 1996, p. 1). I want to honor that experience and the people I shared it with. When I first started teaching at Pleasant Hill Community School, the turnover rate was 50%. On paper, the turnover rate was marked at 200% because half of the students would change over four times over the course of the school year. School attendance was poor and very irregular, leading to many teaching challenges. However, as I worked at Pleasant Hill over time, I came to realize the students were more than capable of educational success if they just made it to school. Over the course of my ten years there, the retention rate grew to over 80 %. By my fifth year, we had enough returning students and a retention level to give us a critical mass of students. This critical mass of students then set the tone for the students who revolved through the school, rather than the other way around. Like Chesmu Akecheta believed making flutes brought so many students into Westmount, I too began to believe that the

Songs of the Spirit curriculum was a factor at Pleasant Hill and was significant in bringing students in from the storm.

For some families, the storm consisted of coping with the impact and effects of living in poverty and often substandard housing. For other families, the storm was much more turbulent. Children, some whose parents had been murdered, had been or were incarcerated, had been or were in gangs, had been or continued to come in conflict with the law, had been or continued to struggle with a history of abuse and/or addictions came to school, into “the eye of the storm,” as it was the most stable and safe place in their day. I soon discovered that I, the “teacher,” was to receive an education beyond what I ever imagined. The circumstances I found myself in necessitated that I become the learner, if I was to have any hope of being able to teach my students or to meet their most basic needs. I became keenly aware of the importance of the details, as most often they revealed the real story and “the truth behind it” (Kenneth Charlette, Recorded conversation, December 5, 2005). I came to believe that to try and communicate research from core neighborhoods without providing the storied details, the participants’ perspectives, and the history that led us to where we are today, would be to try and tell the story without acknowledging the storm that shaped it, leading to a less than complete understanding or, even worse, to misunderstanding.

Ian Sewall’s (1996) work helped me to envision an image of what the lived lives of so many of my students was and still is today. Sewall brought forward the metaphor of “shifting ice floes” through the Inuk story of Galupiluk, a sea monster (p.6).

As legend has it, Galupiluk is a sea monster who catches disobedient children when they wander out on to the shifting sea ice, trapping them in the hood of its

parka. I wondered about the hood on its shoulder. Did it carry within our Willy and Susan and Donna and Cliff? That there are countless children out on the shifting ice floe seems to be an unfortunate given. It may be that our entire species lives in such a habitat and in such a state of disequilibrium. But I have been awe struck these past months by the drama and number of our school children who seem to have found no way back to solid ground. And if education is to play a part in this search, then what? Is it a matter of learning to negotiate the shifting ice floes? Or is it a matter of learning to negotiate with Galupiluk? (Sewall, 1996, p. 6)

Many of my students and their families have been and continue to be stranded on the shifting ice floes, ice floes made up by the multi-generational impact of colonialism and the residential school era that led to abuse, addictions, conflict with the law, incarceration, and conditions of poverty.

In the fall of 1995, I found myself thrown out amongst my students and their families on my own piece of shifting ice. As a beginning teacher, I didn't feel I had a firm footing on my craft. I was overwhelmed, feeling I had so much to learn about teaching music, let alone trying to comprehend the lived lives of my students. Just when I thought I had something figured out or mastered, the ice around me or below me would shift giving me an entirely new reality to deal with. To survive, I too had to learn to negotiate the ice floes on a daily basis, like my students and their families. I discovered that my most thoroughly planned lessons could be complete and utter failures because the ice had shifted beneath enough students that it altered the reality of the moment I was teaching in.

Meanwhile, my spontaneous, in the moment, go with your gut lessons often turned out be the most successful because I was able to move and flow, even if the ice shifted below us.

I learned out of necessity to remain open to anything that might capture the imagination of my students, especially the senior kids. I believe this openness is what led me to finding the Native American Flute and to my journey bringing it to my students. I am still intrigued at how the chaos of my lived teaching life led me to discover the peaceful and calming sound of the Native American Flute, and the possibility of healing which it brought to those of us caught out on the shifting ice.

### **Impacting Students and its Importance - Practical Justification for the Research**

This inquiry is significant at this time and place for a number of reasons. First of all, Saskatchewan Education Indicators (Saskatchewan Learning, 2004) states that the province's population is aging while at the same time the young Aboriginal population is growing exponentially (p.5). When you take into account the potential number of young Aboriginal children, who have parents or grandparents who were stolen away from their families during the Residential School era, it becomes instantly apparent the exponential potential for grave educational and social consequences in the near future if we do not take concerted action soon. Secondly, unsuccessful and disconnected Aboriginal youth are being drawn into using drugs and alcohol, and a growing number of gangs (Criminal Intelligence Service Canada [CISC], 2004, unpaginated). Finally, there is a looming labor shortage we are just now beginning to experience. These jobs could help to improve and change the lives of Aboriginal people who might otherwise become "persistent delinquents" (Canadian Council on Social Development [CCSD], 2007) or come into conflict with the law (CISC, 2004).

Doug Cuthand (2006), a First Nations writer and producer, points out that “years of neglect, residential schools and colonialism have left many of [his] people in a dysfunctional world” (p. A11). These “problems continue to cost society” (p. A11) dearly every year financially, morally, and spiritually. Cuthand (2006) points out that it would be a great deal less expensive to “provide adequate education programs, drug and alcohol rehabilitation and access to employment” (p. A11). Despite the increasing number of Aboriginal students “in both public schools and higher education, there are few examples of curriculum sensitivity to the multiplicity of economic, social, and cultural factors bearing on a student’s educational life” (Giroux, 1997, p. 50). There is no denying our shared history. To do so serves no purpose other than to continue to perpetuate old stereotypes and bigotry. It is only by embracing and accepting what has taken place, both good and bad, that we can ever heal and move forward. Giroux (1997) points out the kind of impact that denial of what has and continues to take place can lead to in education.

Embodying dominant forms of cultural capital, schooling often functions to affirm the Eurocentric, patriarchal histories, social identities, and cultural experiences of middle-class students while either marginalizing or erasing the voices, experiences, and cultural memories of so-called “minority” students.” (Giroux, 1997, p. 43)

Like Giroux, I believe we need more culturally appropriate curricula that affirm the identity of Aboriginal people and help them to connect positively to their roots and who they are. We are at a critical juncture in our history as the Aboriginal population is growing exponentially. The sooner we act, the easier it will be to help Aboriginal people heal from the cruelties of the past and move forward to more fulfilling lives. I wonder if

the “Songs of the Spirit” curriculum can be a part of bringing healing into the lives of those impacted by the residential school legacy.

### ***Music is Powerful Medicine***

In the words of Roland Duquette (Personal communication, March, 1998), former Elder at Pleasant Hill Community School, “Music is like powerful medicine to my people. It can be used to help heal.” Although Indigenous cultures have been aware of the healing powers and inherent spiritual aspect of music since time immemorial (March, 1998), many educational decision makers in the dominant culture have yet to value the educational benefits that can be derived from music and they have yet to embrace this holistic philosophy of learning. From the teachings I received from Elders and from my life’s experiences, I came to believe “that human beings make music because it enables us to act and experience ourselves as passionate, communal, and spiritual people, an amalgam of mind, body, and spirit” (Harris, 2005, p. 6). Harris says that making music allows us to experience ourselves as “creators, both alone and together with others, of highly meaningful and powerful human events” (p. 6). Kenneth Charlette, Artistic Director of the Saskatchewan Native Theatre Company, believes “the arts are a part of the human makeup and cannot be denied” and “every human being has it within themselves to be an artist” (Kenneth Charlette, Recorded conversation, December 5, 2005, pp. 2-3). Kenneth relates creativity to the *Creator* (p.8). He says that when artists create drama, music, visual art, or dance they are trying to emulate and connect with the greatest creator of all (pp.8-9). I sense that when youth participate in something that is both meaningful and powerful, they themselves feel *empowered, in control, and connected*, emotions that are too often missing in the lives of many people living in



poverty, on the edge of society. Still most decision makers in education fail to recognize and value what the arts bring to a *complete human education*.

In the words of Elliot Eisner (2002), “The arts have suffered from a stereotype that regards them as more ornamental than essential, more emotional than reflective, closer to the rim of educational purposes than to its core” (p. 1). Harris (2005) believes that “[i]n practical terms, the experience of creativity may fuel or ignite an inner drive which in turn pushes one to develop the intelligences, skills, conditions, values, and attitudes which are so essential to the development of creative experience and production” (Harris, unpublished personal notes). Still, I am yet to hear an administrator say, “Hey, let’s spend more money on the music program.” While I have observed repeatedly the positive impact and benefits many students receive from their participation in a music program delivered by a trained music specialist, and I have experienced very generous verbal praise from administrators, I have not, regretfully, seen increased financial support for music education.

When the students from Pleasant Hill Community School were selected to perform at the National Orff (music) Conference in Calgary in 2004, permission was granted for the trip and I received many compliments, congratulations, and kind words for the work I did in preparing the children for this opportunity. The students from Pleasant Hill were the only children’s group from Saskatchewan to be selected to perform and one of only three from across Canada. In the videotaped performances submitted to the national committee for consideration, the children demonstrated that, given the opportunity, they were capable of competing with children from across the country. Although we received much verbal support for this once in a lifetime opportunity, we

received no financial support from the school or the school division. We were allowed to use the school to practice, to host a series of school performances, to do the fundraising, and to go on the trip. However, we did not receive any financial assistance for the cost of substitute teachers, costumes, tobacco, honoraria for Elders, travel expenses, meals, or accommodations for the performances and trip. The absolute absence of financial support led me to the belief that Eisner is right. Too many administrators think of music as “more ornamental than essential, more emotional than reflective, closer to the rim of educational purposes than to its core” (Eisner, 2002, p. 1).

Kenneth Charlette points out that if we continue neglecting to develop the human side of our children for the sake of bowing to the technocracy,<sup>5</sup> this can, and will, lead to catastrophic effects for all of mankind.



Learning about who we are spiritually. Learning about who we are as human beings far outweighs any technological advance. Because even with technological advances, if they don't somehow work towards our humanity, it becomes a killer. Much like the insanity that we live in today. You know, the insanity of poisoning our waters for what? . . . Water is the gift of life here. We destroy that we destroy ourselves. (Kenneth Charlette, Recorded conversation, December 5, 2005, p. 22)

“Perhaps one day not only music but all of the arts will be recognized for their potentially important contributions for helping our children realize their humanity” (Eisner, 2002, p.1).

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<sup>5</sup> Technocracy is described as “that society in which those who govern justify themselves by appeal to technical experts who justify themselves by appeal to scientific forms of knowledge” technocracy. (n.d.). *WordNet® 2.1*. Retrieved February 15, 2007, from Dictionary.com website: <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/technocracy>

### *Social Research*

The Canadian Council on Social Development “is a non-profit social policy and research organization focusing on issues such as poverty, social inclusion, disability, cultural diversity, child well-being, employment and housing” (CCSD, 2007, unpaginated) The CCSD compiled research from Round Table Discussions that were held in Saskatoon in November of 2003. In the Saskatoon Round Table discussions, Karen Pine-Cheechoo, Executive Director of White Buffalo Youth Lodge, a drop-in centre for youth at risk, stated that “we need to recognize these kids early. We’re going to have an influx of criminals, because we are not doing it on the front end. We are frustrated because we are a recreation centre and despite running all day, we know we’re not meeting needs” (CCSD, 2003, p. 4). “Research shows that 30% to 70% of young offenders and inmates have experienced learning problems. And almost 50% of adolescent suicides had previously been diagnosed with learning disabilities” (CCSD, 2003).

Youth at risk are in special need of treatment. Many of these youth don’t know how to be any other way than what they saw and learned in their own home environment while growing up. It is hard to know what to do when your parents use drugs, are affiliated with a gang, and poverty reigns. In some cases they need to be shown appropriate interpersonal skills, taught values and morals, and introduced to living skills that are productive rather than destructive. (Vissell, 2004, p.14)

Sometimes life’s stories have a way of providing us with an opportunity to see possibilities, of foregrounding the impact of an experience. In June of 2005, I observed a very fascinating example of the power music has to evoke deep heartfelt emotions. I

listened to a professor, soon to retire from work at the University of Saskatchewan, tell a very interesting story of a wonderful trip to China. He brought a group of graduate students over to observe and study education in Chinese schools. Throughout the trip they saw some of the finest schools the officials had to showcase. However, at the end of the trip, they observed students at a school located in an area that had been conquered, leaving a minority of the original people from this area as part of an underclass in Chinese society. The appearance of the school, its teachers and its students left the professor believing they were in need of more money for education. He told me that, as a result of not being a part of the dominant culture, the students from this school would be streamed into vocational programs.

To conclude their visit and in thanks for the hospitality they had been shown, the group of graduate students sang a song to their hosts. In return, the school sang a somewhat mournful song from their culture in return. As the professor described this moment in time, tears welled up in his eyes. From his tears, I could tell this was the highlight of the trip. He had been through a profound emotional experience that mere words could do not explain.

### **From Teacher to Researcher**

When I think of what makes me an effective teacher, I think of the thoughts and words of Maxine Greene, in her book *Releasing the Imagination*. Greene (1995) speaks of “social imagination” (p. 5). “What I am describing here is . . . thinking that refuses mere compliance, that looks down roads not yet taken to the shapes of a more fulfilling social order, to more vibrant ways of being in this world” (p. 5).

I have found myself in situations that have not only required but necessitated that I “look down roads not yet taken” in order meet the needs of the children I teach. I created a summer program, one example where I refused “mere compliance,” so some students might have a better chance of having opportunities needed to meet their full potential. Because when we do not look down roads not taken, we end up following roads too well known, too well traveled; roads that lead to an all too often lived story of poverty, of core neighborhoods, and of marginalized populations.

### *The Summer Program*

After teaching at Pleasant Hill Community School for eight years, I believed there were things that could be done to make a significant difference in the quality of life for our kids. Thanks in large part to the addition of the Songs of the Spirit curriculum, the music classes were becoming manageable to teach and the overall level of respect for one another in the school was very high. However, there was still one group of students that were very challenging to work with. I hadn’t taught them how to make and play the Northern Spirit Flute because they were only in grade three and could be such a challenging group to work with. Like Nitika, many of her classmates were living “in troubled home environments sometimes characterized by temporary guardianship, foster care, parents serving prison sentences, and the cycle of poverty, transient life and violence that often characterize inner-city neighborhoods” (Ward & Wason-Ellam, 1995, p. 16). I saw some improvement in their behavior over the course of the year, but I kept thinking they needed a little something extra to get them on track. That is when I came up with the idea of providing a summer program to give nine of the most challenging students a head start as they entered grade four. I created a month-long program that led into the school year.

I named the summer program “Heart of the City Summer Music and Life Skills Program.” The Saskatoon Public School Division was very generous in providing the culture room and gym at Pleasant Community School for us to use during the month of August. The program provided lessons in music, drama, visual art, and life skills. Success with a number of funding applications made it possible to hire two people to provide expertise in areas of drama, visual art, and meal preparation. Charissa Mazer had taught drama to high school youth in Family Service Saskatoon’s “Performing Arts Program.” Gina Dyck had taken a food preparation course at Saskatchewan Institute of Applied Science and Technology, in addition to having a background in visual art. Both women were taking classes at the University of Saskatchewan towards their goal of becoming teachers. We each had a group we were responsible for keeping on task throughout the day. I had three boys in my group, while Charissa and Gina each had three girls in their groups.

Each day the program started with a breakfast of juice and toast or milk and cereal. We discovered, within the first couple of days, that providing breakfast increased the likelihood the kids would show up on time. Throughout each day was a drama lesson, a visual art lesson, a lesson on learning how to play African drums, and a lesson on how to make and play a the Northern Spirit Flute. Every day one of the groups was responsible for preparing dinner. Another group was responsible for cleaning up and washing dishes, while the third group had the day off from kitchen responsibilities. We ended each day with a snack or treat.

There were many additional components that enhanced the program’s success. We were extremely fortunate to have our Elder, Marie Horse, take part in the summer

program. Each Monday morning started with a traditional lesson from Marie. Another component we planned into the program was “lunch with the leaders.” We invited Aboriginal role models from the community to the school and partnered them up with the children in the program. The pairs sat together for lunch and got a chance to get to know each other. On Fridays, we made a trip to one of the swimming pools and barbecued hot dogs or hamburgers for lunch. A highlight of the program was an overnight trip to Manitou Beach where we all stayed at a bed and breakfast. While there, the children performed on the flutes they had created and Orff instruments<sup>6</sup> for people from the Youth Child Advocate’s office, as they concluded a series of meetings. Marie, our Elder, made the overnight trip to Manitou Beach with us, providing additional traditional teachings. The summer program concluded on the final Friday with a performance and barbecue for family and friends. The children were awarded certificates at the end of the concert in recognition of their hard work and successful completion of the program. The pride I saw in the eyes of the children and their families strengthened my belief that music and the arts can gently penetrate the hardest shells that the toughest kids can put up to protect themselves, somehow reaching in and touching their spirits, their very essence of being, in ways that nothing else can.

### *Lived Landscapes – Living on the Ice Floes*

My thoughts of the summer program brought me back to Ian Sewall’s poem and his experience as a community school liaison worker with Peace Wapiti School Division where he served “as a bridge between the home and the school” (Sewall, 1996, p. 4).

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<sup>6</sup> Orff instruments are a set of classroom music instruments that include the xylophone, metalophone and glockenspiel. Each group of instruments represents different tonal colours and cultures. The xylophone is based on an African instrument called the balophone. The metalophone is based on the Indonesian gamelon. The glockenspiel has its roots in Germany.

Sewall's metaphor of children who have wandered out onto the ice floe, the continuously shifting life circumstances many find themselves in, loomed large in my mind. How it so clearly encapsulated the lived lives of the children I taught. Daily, sometimes moment to moment, right beneath their feet, what they stood on might shift. From which direction or how big the shift might be could not be predicted. Would it shift so much that it would knock them down? Many children face uncertainty when they leave school. Will they be safe walking home? Will they be bullied? Will they be propositioned by a man driving by in a car? Will someone be home? Will the adults be drunk or high? Will there be food at home? Will there be a party? Will somebody make supper? Will they be cared for? Will it be safe to be home tonight? Will they have to baby-sit siblings while the adults go out? Will the adults come home? The worries and uncertainties can be endless.

But what about from home to school? I turned the metaphor inwards on the school landscape. What if the child experienced difficulty in school? What might their concerns be then? Will they be safe walking to school? Will they be bullied? Will they be propositioned by a man driving by in a car? Will their teacher be there or will there be a sub? Will the teacher be in a good mood? Will they be welcome to eat at the breakfast and lunch programs? Will there be a test? Will there be something fun to do? Will their friends be at school? Will they be cared for and treated well by staff? Will they be bullied or threatened at school? Had I ever taken into consideration that for many students the school landscape was also shifting beneath their feet?

That "there are countless children out on the shifting ice floe seems to be an unfortunate given" (Sewall, 1996, p. 6). Having started at two new schools in the fall of 2006, I see new groups of students who live through the same uncertain circumstances as

my former students. It makes me wonder, when one starts multiplying the number of community schools by the number of similar students just in my city, let alone across the province or country, how many children and youth there really are living such turbulent lives? This doesn't even take into consideration the estimated one thousand students who are not in school in Saskatoon (CCSD, 2003).

***The School of Life – War and Humanity – Being Forever Changed***

I return to Clandinin and Connelly's (2000) "school of life." I remember having that exact phrase, "school of life," come to mind when I worked on my first resume after returning from traveling through Latin America. I learned so much about life on that six-week journey in 1986. I experienced first hand the horrors of war and the indomitable nature and goodness of the human spirit in Guatemala and El Salvador through the hate filled eyes of young soldiers carrying machine guns, the utter fear and worry in the eyes of a middle class mother and her son looking for a way out of San Salvador; the kindness and generosity of a young boy, in the midst of all this chaos, sharing his lunch with me while we traveled on the same bus. Yes. I had become a "citizen of the world," a world that had lost its luster and shine. I returned home a different person; a changed, more human, being. I could no longer look at myself as separate from the problems of others in the world. How did I share these experiences, experiences that had so profoundly impacted my being with my family and friends? Like those who lived here long before me, I communicated what I learned through stories.

I continue as a researcher to communicate what I learned, and am learning, through stories. Like Coles (1989), I feel the very strong call of stories. I find myself using stories from my lived experience, like parables I grew up hearing in church, to teach students life lessons beyond the designated curriculum. Stories, for me, are the

music of a lived life, complex, rich, full of feelings and expression. I've come to view my life as series of an interconnected series of stories that interweave between personal and social, backward and forward, and situated in place (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). The latest and richest in the list of my stories, my research on the impact of the Songs of the Spirit curriculum, is inextricably connected to and shaped by all of the stories that came before it.

## CHAPTER 3

### **Unpacking my Baggage - My Roots and Storied Life Experiences**

I grew up in St. Brieux, a primarily French village of 400, virtually all white middle class, people in north central Saskatchewan. My mother was a schoolteacher and my father owned a Chrysler dealership. I am the youngest in a Catholic family of six, with three brothers and two sisters. The youngest of my sisters has Down Syndrome. I have fond memories of playing with her when I was very young. I also recall being very upset and disappointed when she got to go to school and I didn't. I had reasoned that we were both the same size so I should be able to go with her, even if she was four years older than me. My mother used this opportunity to teach me that different people have different needs, a lesson that has stayed with me.

My interest in music began at an early age. Listening to Jackie, my oldest sister, play the piano, inspired me to want to do the same. I remember sitting down at the keyboard, whenever I would get the chance, and losing myself in the sounds of the instrument. It was like the music transported me to a different time and place or, as Native American Flute player Kevin Locke says, "a place of timelessness" (King, 1999). Some of my fondest childhood memories are of sitting at the piano and becoming totally consumed in the creative process of making up my own songs.

I began piano lessons at the convent with Sister Irene when I was in grade three. Needless to say, I was very excited about starting to play trumpet when I joined the school band program in grade six. In grade eight, I taught myself how to play the guitar and I started a rock band with some of my friends in grade ten. By the time I finished high school, I was determined to make music my career. I played professionally in the

early to mid-eighties in a band called “The Boot” before it morphed into “The Krayons” when the lead singer left.

Like most small town boys, I was also into sports. I played basketball in high school, junior hockey with Team Melfort, while passing my grade eight piano exam and participating in both the school concert and jazz bands. After school and on weekends, I worked at my father’s business, Dubé Garage Ltd., changing oil, fixing tires and doing a variety of other tasks. Little did I know the skills I was learning would be put to such good use making flutes. After work was done, our band, The Boot, would play most Saturday nights at small town dances in our area or in northern Saskatchewan. Eventually, the band moved to Saskatoon and went full time, leading to my first musical career.

I made my living as a professional musician, traveling throughout western Canada, until the fall of 1986. I finally got burned out, from being on the road with the band, and I changed direction in my life. At this time, I took my first substantial vacation backpacking by myself throughout Mexico, Guatemala, El Salvador and Belize. Two of the aforementioned countries were in the midst of civil wars, something that I was too naïve to fully comprehend until it was too late to turn back. I gained a much broadened worldview from this experience. I became, in the words of a person I met at the youth hostel in Cancun, Mexico, “a citizen of the world.”

Those words forever changed the way I saw myself in the world, how I connected with people and situations. I no longer viewed myself as “separate from,” but rather as “a part of” what could, should, and would be. Perhaps this is why I was so profoundly affected by my work with students at Pleasant Hill Community school and the lives they

lived, why I felt the need to not just stand by while innocent children missed out on opportunities I took for granted as a child.

Upon returning to Canada, I worked managing a grocery store in the small town of Invermay. This was a short lived experience that was followed with a job working as a DJ at Chelly's, a club located in Melfort, thirty-five miles from my home town. Music, it seemed, had a hold on me. I followed this experience with a two year record production course at Trebas Institute of Recording Arts in Toronto. During my studies at Trebas, I tutored some students in music theory. I enjoyed the experience and started to think that teaching might be a career option. Matt Vanderwood, my theory professor, encouraged me to come and check out York University, where he taught as a sessional lecturer. I took Matt up on his offer. I went to York to observe a class taught by one of his colleagues. I started to believe that going to university and becoming a teacher might be a good career choice. Reflecting on the enjoyment I received from tutoring classmates in music theory while at Trebas, I decided to return to Saskatchewan in the fall of 1990 to enter the College of Education as a French teacher, with music as a minor. Two weeks of studies as a French major and a very long night of looking up psychology words in the French dictionary, then having to cross reference them in the English dictionary (as I did not understand the English words used to describe the French terms) convinced me to change my major to music. Once again, it seemed that music beckoned to me. I also started playing in a 50s and 60s band called "Crushed Velvet Elvis" at Christmas of that year.

I received my Bachelor of Music in Music Education with Great Distinction from the University of Saskatchewan in the spring of 1994. I began my teaching career at Caroline Robins Elementary School in the fall of that year, as the half-time itinerant

music teacher. As mentioned at the beginning of the chapter, I picked up another half-time music position at Pleasant Hill Community School the following year.

### ***One Red Rose – A Storied Beginning of Teaching***

This was it, late August and my first day at Pleasant Hill Community School. Barely able to contain my enthusiasm at being a full-time music teacher, I picked up my keys from the secretary and made my way to what would be the music room. My heart sank a little as I opened the door and walked into a dreary brown and gray room, the colors making it seem a bit surreal, like a black and white movie. As I looked around, I saw an old beat up acoustic piano, a table with a pile of banged up small percussion instruments, and what looked like the original blackboards from when the school opened in 1910. Suddenly I noticed something that stood in stark contrast to the rest of room. There, in the darkest, dingiest corner of the room, stood a single bright red rose in a tiny sparkling crystal vase. I walked over to read the skinny one-line note attached to it. “Welcome to Pleasant Hill. Have a great year!” Although there was no signature, I knew it came from Donna Hrytzak, a very thoughtful principal. This was to be the first of many brightly shining treasures and beacons of hope that I would discover amongst what at moments seemed like insurmountable darkness during my time at Pleasant Hill Community School.

### ***Teacher Training Leads to Looking Down Roads Not Yet Taken***

Challenging teaching positions gave me the desire to improve my teaching skills. This led to a series of additional studies in the Orff Schulwerk approach to teaching elementary music with Judy Sills and Jos Wuytak. I obtained my Masters Certification in Orff Schulwerk from the University of Alberta in 1995. While attending the National Orff Music Conference in 1996, I participated in a welcoming drum circle with Master

Drummer, David Thiaw. This primal, hands on learning experience made an immediate connection to something inside me that led me to work independently at incorporating drumming into my teaching. I started sharing the experience with colleagues by facilitating David Thiaw's visit to Saskatoon to do workshops. At the following National Orff Conference, Dr. Will Schmid presented a session on the World Music Drumming curriculum he developed in conjunction with support from the REMO drum company. Subsequently, I took World Music Drumming courses, obtaining my Level III certificate. Through these courses, I had the opportunity to study with Master drummer, Sowah Mensah and Josh Ryan, a specialist in Afro-Cuban drumming. In addition to drumming, I learned to play the West African Flute from Sowah Mensah. I went on to study with Joseph Ashong, a Master drummer from Ghana, West Africa who currently resides in Saskatoon. This led to me performing in Joseph's drum group Enije. I also took the Facilitator's Playshop training with Arthur Hull and REMO's HealthRhythm's Training™ with Dr. Barry Bittman, neurosurgeon, and Christine Stevens, music therapist. The energy and excitement these new musical learning opportunities generated in my students inspired me to continue thinking outside of the regular set of parameters that most elementary music teachers work from. I learned to think beyond what I had experienced and been taught, to try and envision what might better meet the needs of my students.

***Inspiring the Heart of the City Piano Program***

*"Success can only be measured by how much you helped the people."  
Anonymous First Nations Man*

When I first started teaching at Pleasant Hill Community School, Kachina Anaba,<sup>7</sup> one of my ten year old students, came to the music room every day after school and asked if she could play the piano. I encouraged her to play while I sat at my desk and worked on planning for the next day. After a couple weeks of this quite regular routine, I became curious as to how her hands were on the keyboard. I could also hear some familiar melodies becoming clearer and more precise with each time Kachina came and practiced. I stood up quietly, slowly sauntered to the blackboard, and made like I was cleaning it, all with the express purpose of seeing how her fingers were meeting the keys. Perfect! Kachina's fingers were curved naturally, something that had taken much practice for me to master, and her hand and arm position were excellent too. I was instantly struck with the thought that all this child needed was the opportunity for lessons and she would be a much better piano player than I was.

I checked with Donna, my principal, to see if it would be okay for me to try and recruit some volunteer piano teachers to come to our school and teach piano lessons to the kids. She said, "Knock yourself out. Give it a try." I put up some posters at the University of Saskatchewan and managed to recruit four volunteer piano teachers. I was thrilled to get things organized, all the time having Kachina in the forefront of my mind for lessons. I thought to myself, "She is going to be so excited." As I got things organized, I made a trip to the office to share the great news, not even realizing Kachina had not come to play after school that day. The secretary solemnly informed me Kachina

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<sup>7</sup> Kachina is a Hopi name that means "sacred dancer." It is being used as her pseudonym because it reflects the gift of music this young girl inspired and the continued interconnected dance of our life journeys. Anaba is a Navajo Native American name that means "she returns from war." It is being used as her pseudonym because it reflects the ongoing battle that Kachina wages against her addictions and my hope that some day she will finally return successfully from this life-long battle.

had tried to commit suicide and she wouldn't be coming back to our school. My heart broke into about a million pieces at that moment. How on earth could a ten year old child find her place in the world so desperate that she would try to end her life? "My God," I thought, "she is the same age as my stepdaughter, Jessica."

This tragic news made me even more determined to try and make music possible for the kids at Pleasant Hill. I started the piano program with the thought of Kachina never too far from the surface. Although she never had the chance for piano lessons, thanks to her inspiration, twelve happy students performed in a heart-warming and soul inspiring piano recital the following spring. Through the contribution of a large number of volunteers and generous financial donors and fundraising efforts, the volunteer piano program grew to involve over three hundred children living in disadvantaged situations, at schools in Saskatoon, Regina, Moose Jaw, Prince Albert, North Battleford, Edmonton, and Ottawa.

### *Creating the Circle of Peace*

I recognized early on in my teaching that the discipline required by students to be successful at piano was too demanding for some of my students who, in spite of this, were very musical. Having experienced instant success with my first drumming experience with David Thiaw, I sought to put together a program that would provide children and youth with a more immediate sense of success and satisfaction. I founded and began teaching the Circle of Peace drumming program in the fall of 2000. The program was designed to provide the opportunity for youth at risk<sup>8</sup> to participate in

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<sup>8</sup> "Youth at risk are young people who are exposed to risky situations in any number of differing areas of life. The risk could be such things as growing up in a gang neighbourhood, being exposed to drugs, domestic violence, physical and sexual abuse, neglect, poverty, being part of a divorced/single parent

twelve sessions of World Music Drumming with the intent of building community, communication skills, greater self-esteem and self-confidence.

One of my most emotionally moving experiences occurred when I partnered up youth from inner city schools with seniors from Luther Riverside Terrace for six weeks of drumming. During my initial contact with the seniors' residence, I asked if I could recruit some volunteers to work with the kids. I arrived and was still setting up the drums when the residents started to show up. From the poster I made, they thought there was going to be a performance of some sort, something they had become accustomed to. As they came in, I invited them to come and sit at a drum, quite to their surprise. I managed to convince everyone who came in that it would be okay and the chairs around the drums eventually filled up. I explained what I had in mind, asking that they bear with me as I gave them a lesson in African drumming. The seniors were very playful and we had a lot of fun learning how to play the drums. I successfully completed my sales pitch, having all but two seniors with schedule conflicts, commit to partnering with a young person for six weeks to do some drumming.

Afterwards, I asked the woman who had invited me to come about where I might store the drums until we would meet the following week. I noticed some of the seniors were eavesdropping on our conversation. Finally an elderly gentleman got brave enough to interrupt, "Excuse me. You know I've got room in my apartment for a drum. I don't mind taking one if it would help." Five more seniors who hadn't left yet joined in offering their apartments for storage as well. I was so pleased they enjoyed the experience drumming so much that they would help out in this way. I proceeded to put

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family, being exposed to parental drug and alcohol abuse/use, having learning disabilities, and others (Blumstein, 2002; Gregson, 1994; Reich et al, 2002; Russell, 1999; Scott et al., 2002 in Visell, 2004, p.14)

the rest of the drums away, then it struck me. How on earth are these frail elderly people going to get their drums upstairs to their apartments? The elevator was at the other end of the building. As I turned to offer my help, I saw the most incredible sight. The elderly gentleman, well into his eighties, started to load the drums onto his and a friend's wheeled walkers. This freed up the hand of one of the participants who had to pull along her oxygen tank while using a cane in her other hand. As I watched them slowly push their walkers and roll away I thought, "My God! May I have the same playful *joie de vivre* when I'm their age."

As I replayed this scene in my mind's eye, my heart was moved and I felt emotions rise within me again. I felt the joy of sharing in a communal musical experience with people that made me feel like I was with my grandfather again. I felt happiness that they would be able to help youth from core neighborhoods feel connected to a caring adult. I also felt a sense of fun and excitement, the same feelings I had had at my first drum circle. I began to wonder if the connection drumming had made with octogenarians was the same type of connection that students and research participants experienced with playing the Northern Spirit Flute.

### ***Voices of the Wind – My Journey With the Native American Flute Begins***

Although the community-based programs that I started were very successful, I found that, at times, it was difficult to keep my senior students motivated in the music class. I found myself looking for something that would grab their imagination and keep them motivated to keep making music. In the fall of 2000, I attended Northwest Music's choral reading session. I came across a book by Bryan Burton called *Voices of the Wind* (1998). The book had examples of Native American Flute music that could be played on the recorder. Burton had researched a number of songs, performers and instrument

makers. I purchased the book and began to explore how I might incorporate the Native American Flute into my middle-years music classes. I quickly learned that the wooden flutes were very expensive and might pose tuning problems in an ensemble setting. After some research on the internet, I located flutes that were made out of injection molded plastic. A class set of flutes was purchased and Native American Flute was offered for the first time to my senior students. The instruments were very well received by the students, although they were in a key that did not lend itself to performance with the Orff instruments. While at home sick one day, I began to experiment with a left over piece of PVC tubing to see if I could create the sound producing mechanism for a flute. I was successful in this first attempt and I continued to experiment until I designed a flute that would play in tune with the Orff instruments. The skills learned from handling a variety of tools in my father's garage paid off greatly.

For the first year, I made flutes after school with a small group of students. Since then, every student had the opportunity to drill the holes in their own flute, and to paint and decorate their flute afterwards. Students take great pride and ownership in their instrument after they put so much of themselves into making it. Some of my most memorable moments included seeing students gain confidence to perform in front of their peers. Shy and quiet students, like Cocheta<sup>9</sup> and Liluye,<sup>10</sup> gained enough confidence from learning to make and play their flutes that they were able to perform solos at assemblies, school concerts, and at the music festival. Cocheta even performed for a very large public

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<sup>9</sup> Cocheta is a Native American name meaning "that you cannot imagine." It is being used as her pseudonym because it reflects the fact that no one on staff could have ever imagined this child having the confidence to stand up in front of the whole school and perform "Oh Canada" for an assembly.

<sup>10</sup> Liluye is a Native American name that means "singing hawk while soaring." It is being used as her pseudonym because it reflects the beautiful singing sound that she made with her flute and how this child's level of self-confidence and self-esteem seemed to soar from having learned this new skill and from presenting it publicly.

event, celebrating reading, held outdoors in front of the Saskatchewan Institute of Applied Science and Technology. She beamed with pride after her performance.

*“Songs of the Spirit” – Birth of a Curriculum*

It was very easy to engage students in the making and playing of their Northern Spirit Flutes. Once the students heard the gentle haunting sound flute, I had them. As I continued to make the flutes with students, I recognized the interest and enthusiasm that was generated from this creative hands-on experience. I was also cognizant of the fact that learning how to play and perform built self-confidence and self-esteem in students. I wanted to add depth to this learning experience. I wanted to put some meat on the bones, so to speak, of what I was offering my Aboriginal students. I began to research and purchase a variety of Native American Flute resources. I discovered a variety of historical books, songbooks, flute making resources, videos, and method books. I purchased a large amount of the materials I found and started using bits and pieces from them to add more cultural and historical components to what I was teaching my senior students. This evolved so gradually, I wasn't really aware I was beginning to develop a curriculum. I often thought to myself that it would save a huge amount of time if there was one resource I could turn to, something like the World Music Drumming curriculum developed by Dr. Will Schmid.

As I developed cultural and historical teaching materials, I ensured I made students aware of the diversity amongst the hundreds of First Nations that make up North America. The example I liked to use with students was pointing out how all white people are not from the same human tribe either. There are white people who are French, German, English, Ukrainian, Russian, Albanian, Yugoslavian, Polish, and many, many more. I then asked students if it made any sense to think that all First Nations people

spoke the same language or if they had exactly the same culture and traditions. Thus the “Songs of the Spirit” curriculum teaches that the many different types of Native American Flutes come from different parts of the continent and from different First Nations, depending upon the materials that are Indigenous to the area they live in. Still, I longed for that one resource I could turn to where everything would be put together in a useable package. Step by step, I continued to add to my materials, finally realizing that I myself was creating the teacher friendly curriculum I longed for.

### **Retelling the Lived Summer Program**

Looking back to the summer between my eighth and ninth year of teaching, I still vividly remember the mornings when I would go over to Nitika’s<sup>11</sup> house to wake her up for the summer program I offered. I would start by ringing the doorbell, then wait for a minute. I would follow with playful rhythmic knocking on the door, “Shave and a hair cut, two bits!” There would be another uninterrupted pause, with no sound to be heard coming from inside the house. Next, I would ring the doorbell again, this time adding a little rhythm to my efforts to revive those inside. There would be another uninterrupted pause. At this point, I would do my rhythmic knocks on the window only to be followed by yet another uninterrupted pause. After this, it would be time to repeat the cycle again: door bell, knocks on door with rhythm, door bell rhythm, knocks on the window with rhythm. Eventually, usually about eight to ten minutes later, someone would finally get up, or be fed up enough with my persistence, to open the door and let me in.

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<sup>11</sup> Nitika is a Native American name that means “angel of precious stone.” It is being used as her pseudonym because it reflects the hard, protective shell that this child put up to protect herself from emotional harm.

I did not plan on this being part of the job, but to me this young girl was worth the extra effort. Nitika lived her life “in the shadows of family turbulence” (Ward & Wason-Ellam, 1995, p. 16), typical of what many core neighborhood kids experience each and every day of their lives. She was one of six children in a family parented by a single mother who relied on social assistance to makes ends meet.<sup>12</sup> A younger brother and an older sister were enrolled in “storefront schools.”<sup>13</sup> An older brother was in a gang and her oldest brother was hoping to get back into school to complete his grade twelve. Her oldest sister was a teenage mother with two young children to care for.

It took a lot of effort for Nitika to get to school. She struggled with fitting in and finding a way to be successful when she got there, even though I could sense she was a very capable child. I believed this summer program was exactly the type of thing that she could really benefit from, something that would provide some structure to help her bridge between the two summer months and the school year. I designed the month-long program to develop students’ life skills and build their self-esteem. I was engaged with nine of the most challenging students I have ever worked with. Although I taught from grade one to grade eight, this particular group of children just happened to be in grade three. I based the program somewhat on the concept that it takes twenty-one days to break a habit (Williams et al, 2005, p. 19), with the program being nineteen days in length. My goal was to have the students start the school year off with better social skills, higher self-esteem and the ability to work in the school setting more successfully.

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<sup>12</sup> The Saskatchewan Government’s Department of Social Services “social assistance program provides assistance to those in need as a last resort when *they* cannot meet *their* basic living expenses with *their* own resources” (Department of Social Services et al, 2005)

<sup>13</sup> “Storefront schools” (Interior Indian Friendship Society Programs, 2005) provide alternative programming for students who are having difficulty finding success in the mainstream schools in the public school system. The schools are located away from the regular school setting.

I thought the odds were very much in our favor – three adults working with nine young children. How could anything possibly go wrong? I learned within the first two days that in order for the program to be successful, my dream of an easy nine to five summer job was over. A fight broke out on the first day when I went to pick up Marie Horse, our Elder for the program. Marie and I returned to one bloody nose and a shaky start to our first morning. The next day we realized that eight out of nine students had lice. Thankfully, I had an incredible partnership with two young teacher candidates who went the extra mile on countless occasions to make the program a success for the kids. I need give no more than the example of my co-workers spending a twelve-hour day trying to get our students lice free prior to our overnight trip to a bed and breakfast at Manitou Beach. I averaged sixteen to eighteen hour days throughout the entire month of August, leading up to the start of the school year, so the program would be a success for the children. Indeed, the subsequent school year was much better for the students who participated in the program. As a result, the students were able to engage in learning from the first month of the school year. During the previous school year, it had taken until February before I could accomplish the teaching goals I had set out for the class.

### *Lived Lives on Storied Landscapes*

Part of my current teaching assignment involves teaching a group of behaviorally challenged students. I see them three days per week, first class of the morning. Their class is called “Structured Success,” S2P for short. The group varies in size depending on the day and the night before. The maximum number at any one time is twelve, though I usually see around eight or nine students per class. The group dynamic can be extremely volatile from day to day. This makes it very difficult to build a trusting relationship with this group of students. After a month of working with the students, the classroom teacher

informed me that all of the students were on some sort of medication they took just prior to coming to music. While it takes about 45 minutes for the medication to take effect, I have the students for 30 minutes.

Although the group challenged my teaching skills, they managed to learn how to play Hot Cross Buns on the Orff instruments by the end of October. They performed the song flawlessly for their assembly and felt very proud after the performance. In the music class that followed the assembly performance, I planned to build on this successful experience with teaching the students how to play World Music Drums. This class took place at 9:00 a.m. the following Monday morning. Very quickly, it became apparent that their medication had not had a chance to take effect. The students did not have a good class. I had to march them back to their classroom to settle them down and talk about appropriate behavior.

Afterwards, I spoke with the very experienced S2P classroom teacher to ask for suggestions on how to best work with her students. She informed me that one of the students, who in my mind did not have that bad of a class, had not slept much the night before because he was up repeatedly in the middle of the night phoning 911. She told me his mom had spent time in jail for drug offences but that she'd been out and clean for a couple of years. His mother had a new boyfriend who the student quite liked, but they had recently split up. She went on to tell me that, although his parents had also split up some time ago, his father just got out of jail and came over and spent the previous night with his mom. She told me they had got "pinned," a polite way to stay stoned and drunk, and began physically fighting throughout the night, hence the 911 calls.

Were it not for the classroom teacher's trusting relationship with the student and his mother, none of this information would have been available to me. I took time to replay and reflect on how the class had gone for this student, and realized he had done quite well in comparison to other students, let alone given the night he had been through. I wondered about the curriculums inner city students are asked to engage in after such nights. Is there any way that these curriculums take into consideration the volatility of lived situations? How much time in curriculum development is given to think about how, when, and what learning experiences might best meet the needs of students who live chaotic lives? I renamed their class the Soaring Eagles, encouraging them to spread their wings and to learn to fly with the wind.

## CHAPTER 4



### What is Worth Teaching?

It seems like a simple enough question, “What is worth teaching?” You think by now we would have agreement on what might be important in education – what might be reflective of our students and their lives, and be culturally-relevant for them as we worked toward defined outcomes? Kids are multi-dimensional fully human beings and deserve to be embraced and nurtured as such. I believe we miss the most important part of what education is meant to do when we focus on measuring only the students’ reading and math abilities. I believe education should enrich the lives of all of our children. All children should experience joy and success every day they attend school. If not, why go back to school the next day? Every child should be empowered to connect to their inner world and every child should be empowered to connect to their outer world in order to feel a part of that which we are all a part of, the interconnected web of life (Kenny, 2002). Otherwise, there is “little room left for living, for the sake of living a full, rich and free life” (Dewey, 1964, p. 142).

We have to take into account that no two children will be alike. Principal Sakima Qaletqa<sup>14</sup> points out the diversity of students attending Soaring Eagle School of Excellence<sup>15</sup> and how the one size fits all approach to education does not work.

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<sup>14</sup> Sakima is an Ojibway name meaning “chief” and Qulaetaqa is a Hopi word meaning “guardian of the people.” These words are being used to reflect the overarching leadership role this principal plays in trying to best meet the needs of the students who attend Soaring Eagle School of Excellence while trying to guide them to make positive choices.

<sup>15</sup> Pseudonyms are used for names of the school, council, reserves, Elders, students, parents, teachers, administrators to protect the confidentiality and anonymity of those involved in the research.

You have Dene, Saulteaux, Cree, Ojibway, Micmaw, and Anishinawbe. We've had all those students here. Inuit. So how can you have a cookie-cutter approach? I mean you're not even dealing with the same languages, but the ignorance of people out there is they want an Aboriginal approach to education. You know they want a fix. And instead of trying to find that fix globally, let's try to find the fix per kid, like we would for any kid. I value your language, I value your culture. (Sakima Qaletaga, Recorded conversation, February 21, 2006, p. 9)

Each child will have strengths and weaknesses regardless of which learning strategies, new initiatives, or new programs are implemented. Like our fingerprints and DNA, we are all unique individuals – unique living, breathing, feeling, wholly human beings. As a father, a living, breathing, feeling, wholly human being, I think it is irrelevant whether a child is reading at grade level if they have not experienced any joy, self-fulfillment, or happiness in their school day. I believe that if there is a feeling of joy in children's hearts and a bounce in their step, they will continue to happily learn and advance throughout their schooling on their own individual developmental timeline, not on ours. What is wrong with that?

In "The Shame of a Nation," Jonathan Kozol (2005) addresses the idea of what is seen as important enough to be taught and measured in education and how to get answers to the questions that should be asked of education. From 2000 to 2005, Kozol conducted research at sixty schools, in thirty districts, in eleven states across the United States. He took the time to get to know the principals, teachers, and students at these schools and gives very detailed descriptions of the poor conditions of the buildings, the overcrowding

of inner city schools, and the lack of adequate funding to address the learning needs of students. Kozol brings to our attention the fact that public schooling in the United States has become re-segregated over the past decade to the detriment of the minority students who are made up primarily of Black and Hispanic students.

There is no misery index for the children of apartheid education. There ought to be; we measure almost every other aspect of the lives they lead in school. Do kids who go to schools like these enjoy the days they spend in them? Is school, for most of them, a happy place to be? You do not find the answers to these questions in reports about achievement levels, scientific methods of accountability, or structural revisions in the modes of governance. Documents like these don't speak of happiness. You have to go back to schools themselves to find an answer to these questions. You have to sit down in the little chairs in first and second grade, or on the reading rug with kindergarten kids, and listen to the things they actually say to one another and the dialogue between them and their teachers. You have to go down to the basement with the children when it's time for lunch and to the playground with them, if they have a playground, when it's time for recess, if they still have recess at their school. You have to walk into the children's bathrooms in these buildings. You have to do what children do and breathe the air the children breathe. I don't think that there is any other way to find out what the lives that children lead in school are really like. (Kozol, 2005, p. 163)

When I reflect on Kozol's words, "There is no misery index for children," I think back to what Wicasa Langundo, head caretaker at Westmount Community School, thought we owed our children through education.



I don't remember the things I learned in school other than art and wood shop, things that you actually did with your hands, and music. You don't remember all the things you were taught but you remember is how you were treated. You remember the teachers, whether you liked them or not and how they treated you, and I think that is one of the lasting things that we can do for little people for their first twelve years of life or their first twelve years of education. And what you've done with this is that you've given them more and so they're gonna remember how you treated them and what you did for them. And they are gonna remember their flutes even if they don't own them anymore. But they are gonna remember that they did something with them and they had a good time. I see that as the long-term effect and I think it's wonderful. (Wicasa Langundo, Recorded conversation, May 8, 2006, p.8)

Wicasa speaks to the heart of the issue when he points out that students are going to remember if "they had a good time" and that, in and of itself, is what is going to have the long term effect on children. Wicasa points out the obvious that seems to get overlooked in education or at the very least is not valued or seen as significant or important. Children want to be treated well and have "a good time" at school. They want to enjoy life. Why not nurture that *joie de vivre*, so alive in the elderly seniors who carried the drums away on their wheeled walkers in the Circle of Peace program? Would it be so wrong to ask students what makes going to school enjoyable and worthwhile to them or, would it just make sense? Would it make educational sense to feed their spirit so that we can have our students by the heart, then their minds and their bodies will follow (Dubé, 2006)? Would it make sense to make measuring the level of joy in children as

important as measuring the number of books they are reading and at what grade level? In fact, would raising the level of joy and happiness perhaps even help to raise the level of reading more than making children read for an additional ninety minutes every day? Could there be some truth in a quote attributed to a retired administrator from Saskatoon Public School Division? “Music makes kids happy. Happy kids learn better.”

### *Father and Son - Sharing a Musical Moment*

The scene of Jack Whitefish and his nine-year-old son Josh is still fresh in my mind. Jack, a big, strong, stocky single dad, was parenting his two tough, but very likeable, boys. Josh had eagerly joined the Heart of the City Piano Program, but now he was experiencing difficulty staying committed to the practicing that was required to stay in the piano program. I had spoken to Jack about Josh not practicing and he was quick to follow up with his son. Within a day or two, he started to help Josh get to the music room to practice, first thing in the morning. When I entered the music room, I saw Jack seated in a chair near the piano, listening to Josh practice in preparation for the upcoming piano recital. I cheerfully asked Jack how it was going. The big strapping man in a plaid lumberjack shirt, blue jeans and ball cap hesitated. Then he replied very emotionally, all the while struggling to maintain his composure, “Real good. [pause] It kinda brings a tear to your eye.”

Whenever I replay this scene of Jack and Josh sitting at the piano, I try to fit another piece into the puzzle I have in my mind. What was it, within the experience Jack shared with his son, that could penetrate the rough and tough exterior of such a physically intimidating man and connect with him so deeply on an emotional level? Was it the childlike music his son was playing on the piano? Did that bring him back to his childhood? Did he feel like he was sharing in the creation of the music his son was

playing? Was it being present to see and hear his son accomplishing something special, a certain level of mastery on the piano that moved him so emotionally? As a parent who has had similar experiences, I know how much I value sharing these types of moments with my own children. These are the very things that a “rich and free life” are made of (Dewey, 1964, p. 142).

### **Key Assumptions – My Beliefs**

In twelve years of teaching, I never once encountered a single parent who does not want their child to be successful. I also never taught or worked with a student who did not want to be successful or did not want to receive some form of positive praise or recognition. Three key assumptions shaped the vantage point from which I conducted my research: a) students want to be successful, b) parents want their children to be successful, c) students want their parents to see and recognize them being successful. In my experience, music is an extremely effective means of providing students with an opportunity to be successful and, through performance, providing parents with the opportunity to share in that success.

Like Maxine Greene (2005), I believe “the arts provide new perspective on the lived world.” The act of creating is a basic human instinct. When we rediscover that we can create, it can become as Aleshanee Ominotago,<sup>16</sup> a student participant, said “addictive” (Journal writing, March 2006). I see it in my children every day whether it be a new drawing, coloring, building something out of Lego, making up a melody on the piano, or within their non-structured play. This innate ability and desire to create and

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<sup>16</sup> Aleshanee is a Native American word that means “she plays all the time.” It is being used to reflect how this student participant felt “addicted” to playing the flute and in fact was playing it all the time at home. Ominotago is a Cheyenne word that means “beautiful voice.” It is being used to reflect the beautiful sound that she made playing her Northern Spirit Flute.

imagine is the very stuff we need to bring about healing and positive change to our ever-changing world. If we choose to “become wide-awake to the world,” (Greene, 2005, p. 4) we will realize that “we all have the capacity to invent visions of what should be and what might be in our deficient society, on the streets we live, in our schools” (p.5).

### **Why Narrative Inquiry?**

[N]arrative inquiry is a deliberative research process founded on a set of ontological, epistemological, and methodological assumptions which are at play from the first narrative imaginings of a research puzzle through to the representation of the narrative inquiry in research text. (Pushor & Murray Orr, 2007, p. 29)

I originally intended on conducting my research quantitatively. Quantitative research was the primary focus of the first research course I took. Quantitative research seemed very structured, systematic, precise, and focused in terms of the kind of information it would gather. My school division was conducting quantitative research into reading. It seemed to me that numbers and generalizability were what mattered, what would be seen as valid research.

Then I had the opportunity to read some qualitative research, more specifically Pushor’s (2001) narrative inquiry, “A Storied Photo Album of Parents' Positioning and the Landscape of Schools.” As I read Pushor’s research, I was struck by the depth and richness of the content of what I was learning. I tried to think how I could conduct quantitative research that would provide the same quality of detail and level of understanding I was gaining from reading Pushor’s work. I tried to imagine different

ways I might organize and conduct quantitative research so that it would yield the same kind of understandings and quality of information revealed through Pushor's work.

At the same time, I reflected on my teaching experience in the inner city and the lives of the children and their families. So much of what I valued about teaching in a core community school came down to the human factor, the relationships, the stories we told each other about our lives. I recalled how so many times I would create a teachable moment out of a chaotic situation through a story about my life. Somehow through a story I could instantly have the attention of the entire class. Students were fascinated by stories about my children, stories about my travels, stories about my bad habits, stories about my mistakes, stories about my childhood, or stories that imagined what might be for students in the very class I was teaching. Stories captured their attention and imagination like nothing else I had tried.

I remembered one such incident, a moment of sheer teacher exasperation, where I created a story of *what could be* while trying to teach an extremely unfocused and energetic grade one class. This exuberant group had a great deal of difficulty coming to a point of attention from which they could listen to even the briefest of instructions. I had my *musician of the day*, the special helper for the current class, standing up at the front with me to pick a classmate to have a turn. The class instantly broke out into pandemonium with hands up and everyone shouting, "Pick me! Pick Me!"

Spontaneously, I gently picked up the musician of the day under the arms and stood her on the chair I used to sit on at the front of the room so that she was close to my height. This got the class' attention. I seized the moment of silence, broke into the very

dramatic character of an old man, hunched over with a fake cane and began the following storied monologue, inspired and created in that moment.

Now boys and girls this is Miss Tehya<sup>17</sup> the new music teacher. She's taking over teaching music here at Pleasant Hill because I'm an o-o-o-o-old ma-a-a-a-an.

Now she is looking for a wonderful person like herself to have a turn in the music class today. She's looking for a student who has learned the secret of learning just like she did wa-a-a-ay back in grade one at Pleasant Hill Community School.

She's looking for a special student who's learned that if you watch, listen, and do, then anything the music teacher can do, you can do too. Yes. Miss Tehya learned this secret way back in grade one. She watched, she listened, and she would do the work, and what a fine job she did. In fact, she quickly learned that if she tried, there really wasn't anything that she couldn't do. Well, Miss Tehya did this in grade 2, and grade 3, and grade 4, and all the way up through to the end of grade 8. She would watch. She would listen and she would always do the best work possible. Well, let me tell you young whipper snappers, because she did these three **secret** steps to learning, she graduated from grade 8 with excellent marks. She was very proud of herself and so was the rest of her family. She thought to herself, "Hmmm. I wonder if I'll be any good in high school?" And sure enough, even though she was nervous at first, she went on to high school and did the same three secret steps to learning: she watched, she listened, and she did her very best work. Low and behold, she got great marks again in grade 9, in grade 10, in grade 11, and all the way to grade 12. Heck! She graduated with even better marks than

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<sup>17</sup> Tehya is a Native American name that means "precious." It is being used to reflect that I believe every child we teach is precious and has a gift to bring the world.

she had in grade eight. Then Tehya thought to herself, “Hmmmm. This learning thing isn’t so hard after all. All I have to do is watch, listen, and do and I can do pretty much anything I put my mind to. So Miss Tehya decided to go to university to become a teacher, but not just any kind of a teacher. **No-o-o-o-o-o!** She decided to become a **mu-u-u-sic teacher**. And because she had learned **wa-a-a-a-y** back in grade one at Pleasant Hill Community School the secret of learning, she breezed through university with very high marks, all because she learned that if she would watch, listen, and do, then anything her professors could do, she could do too. So Miss Tehya finished university but she didn’t graduate. **No-o-o-o-o-o!** She didn’t graduate because from university you **convocate** (said with an English accent). Convocating is the fanciest way to graduate. Tehya wore a very special black robe, and a special square hat, and she had to walk across the huge stage at the Centennial Auditorium where they announced her name over the big loud speakers so all the world could hear how smart she was. She had to walk all the way across the stage to get her special diploma that had very fancy writing on it from a very important person wearing an even fancier robe and an even fancier hat. The university diploma told everyone that Miss Tehya was very smart and an excellent learner. All this because way back in grade one at Pleasant Hill, Miss Tehya had learned the secret of learning: watch, listen, and do and anything I can do, you can do too. Well Miss Tehya took that diploma and she marched right down here to Pleasant Hill Community School to see the principal to get a job teaching, but not just teaching any old subject. **No-o-o-o-o-o!** She wanted a job teaching **music**, because Mr. Dubé had become an o-o-o-o-o-old ma-a-a-a-a-a-

an and it was time for him to take a rest. The principal was so impressed with her high marks that he hired her right on the spot. Well Miss Tehya marched right upstairs to the music room and said, “Mr. Dubé thank you very much for teaching me the secret to learning way back in grade one here at Pleasant Hill Community School. Because I learned to watch, listen, and do I learned everything I needed to know to become a music teacher and I’m here to give you a break so you can go and rest.” I said, “Thank you so much Miss Tehya. I am so proud of you and I can sure use the rest, too. You have done so well. Your family must be extremely proud of you. Now don’t you forget to teach the wonderful students here at Pleasant Hill Community School the secret of learning just like you learned wa-a-a-a-y back in grade one so that they can turn out to be wonderful just like you.” Now boys and girls, Miss Tehya is going to pick her helper. She is going to look for one of the many students who have wonderful manners just like she did way back in grade one, sitting up nice and tall, with hands in their lap and a nice straight back, not interrupting. You know, a student who knows how to watch, listen, and do so that they can grow up to be wonderful too, just like her.

The students all sat up like little soldiers with their best manners hoping to be picked as her helper, hoping to be a part of the success that Tehya had achieved, even if only in a fictitious, spontaneously created story. Tehya blushed, yet beamed with pride, because somehow I could intuitively sense she had internalized, in some small way, the possibility of a reframed future, one filled with success.

When I sat and reflected on a decade of stories like this, the countless lived experiences that led me to learn how to successfully teach and manage challenging

classes, I believed that quantitative research could not adequately capture the depth and quality of the experiences in a way that would be useful to other educators. I came to the further realization that quantitative research ironically seemed to be the very antithesis of the lived lives of the children I taught and their families: very structured, systematic, precise, and focused.

I wanted to give teachers and researchers a true sense, warts and all, of what it is like to teach children at a core neighborhood community school. I wanted the readers of my research to internalize and feel they had stepped into the lived experience themselves. How could I best communicate to others what students' lives were like? How could I best communicate what it felt like to teach core community students? How could I give other teachers a sense of how I taught so that they might find some "fragmentary clues" (Bateson in Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 7) that might prove helpful in their teaching. Most importantly, how could I honor the students and their First Nations cultures and traditions, cultures built on the oral tradition where knowledge is passed down from generation to generation? I came to what now seems like the very obvious conclusion that stories "lived and told [were needed to] educate the self and others, including the young and those . . . who are new to [these] communities" (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. xxvi).

Over the course of ten years, I became immersed in First Nations cultures through teaching Aboriginal students. I grew to appreciate the stories told by First Nations Elders and the life lessons interwoven within their stories. Somehow, when I was with Elders, I felt the comfort and closeness that I always had with my grandfather, something I always treasured. I wanted to honor the Elders, their teachings, and First Nations' cultures in a

way that seemed natural, in the old way that I had newly come to know. In “Restoring the Sacred Circle – Education for Culturally Responsive Native Families,” Hanohanoh (2001) speaks of how Indigenous research differs from traditional western academic research. Indigenous research “is based on a different set of values designed to help the re-searcher ‘to realize our oneness with all things, to know that all things are our relatives; and then in behalf of all things we pray to *Wakan-Tanka* [the Great Spirit] that He may give to us knowledge of Him who is the source of all things, yet greater than all things’” (Brown, 1989, p. 46 in Hanohanoh, p. 51.). Hanohanoh (2001) thinks of research as a searching again. He denotes this by using a hyphenated spelling of “re-search.”

I wanted to honor this way of seeing and being in the world. I wanted to search again while holding in my mind and in my heart our “oneness with all things.” This way of seeing made sense to the way that I had come to see the world through both Elder teachings and my life’s experiences. I wanted to conduct research with Aboriginal people, not on Aboriginal people. I wanted to query in a responsible and respectful way, an honoring way that recognized “all things are our relatives” and *we are interconnected* (Kenny, 2002). To sift out the lived parts of life from my research, the very parts that shaped and gave meaning to the research and the lives of my fellow human beings, in order to come up with some sort of numerical representation that could be quantified and generalized, seemed to be both illogical and stand in opposition to what Hanohanoh advocated for as an appropriate manner in which to conduct research *with* First Nations people.

My lived teaching experience recognized the multi-dimensional lives of inner city children. This is the reality of what takes place for inner city children, moment to

moment, day to day, year to year, past to present, present to future, and inward and outward. I do not believe it is of value to do one-dimensional testing on multi-dimensional beings living in constantly changing circumstances, on the shifting ice floes. I came to believe that “insights secured from multiple views [were] more attractive than the comforts provided in a single right one” (Eisner, 2002, p. 34). Clandinin and Connelly (2000) state:

narrative inquiry is a way of understanding experience. It is a collaboration between researcher and participants, over time, in a place or series of places, and in social interaction with milieus. An inquirer enters this matrix in the midst and progresses in this same spirit, concluding the inquiry still in the midst of living and telling, reliving and retelling, the stories of the experiences that make up people’s lives, both individual and social. Simply stated . . . narrative inquiry is stories lived and told. (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 20)

### ***Giving Voice to the Silenced***

Coles (1989) points out that “we owe it to each other to respect our stories and to learn from them” (p. 30) and that “the lower order be the ones whose every word really *mattered*, whose meaning be upheld and interesting” (p. 22). For Cole’s, “lower order” means those in society who have not traditionally had their voices heard because they are deemed by those in positions of power to be in some way inferior. He goes on to point out how, “many of us are astonishingly willing to embrace all sorts of speculative metapsychology, including its often cumbersome language, yet we bristle at the notion of certain everyday civilities – regard them as in some way a threat to professional achievement” (p. 23). As educators, we often get caught up and thrust about in the waves and changing trends in education. Acronyms, theories, and labels, endlessly created and

recreated in the name of improving education, are almost comical at times, as can be seen in a lifelong friend's interpretation of Attention Deficit Disorder (A.D.D.). His experience substitute teaching led to his interpretation of the acronym A.D.D. as *Adult Discipline Disorder*.

Considering what Coles speaks of in suggesting we listen to the "lower order" or the stories of the common people as what "matters," I realize there is no need to try and impose complex language or a theoretical framework upon a situation to understand it. All that is needed is the ability to listen "to understand experience . . . and the wholeness of an individual's life experience (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 17). Because each individual's experience needs to be heard in order to achieve greater understanding, it makes sense to give voice not only to the researcher, but also to those who have been silenced (Poupart, 1996). "The silences of women and the marginalized have still to be overcome. The invisibility of too many students has somehow to be broken through" (Greene, 1995, p. 15). For too long Aboriginal people and youth have had research conducted *on them*, rather than *with them*. Narrative inquiry is "a collaboration between researcher and participants, over time, in a place or series of places, and in social interaction with milieus" (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 20).

Michelle Fine (1987) speaks of how "the press for silencing pervades low income urban schools" (p. 157). I have lived through the experience of seeing parents silenced while I myself was silenced by not so subtle threats and intimidation. One becomes infinitely practical when your job, the means of co-supporting your family, is on the line. It is a very painful experience to have the idealism woven within the fabric of your heart torn apart into shreds. I cannot imagine how painful and disempowering it must feel to

live through this experience repeatedly over the course of the education of your children. Fine (1987) goes on to point out that it is not only the parents who are silenced.

But the silencing process bears not only ideological or cosmetic consequence.

These very demands permeate classroom life so primitively as to make irrelevant the lived experiences, passions, concerns, communities, and biographies of low-income, minority students. In the process, the very voices of students and their communities that public education claims to nurture, shut down. (Fine, 1987, p. 158)

Once students are silenced, education ceases to take place. Education of and caring for our children, those most in need of an equal opportunity, is no longer the main goal of “the education system.” Controlling the discourse on the allocation of resources and funding becomes of primary importance. Managing public perception takes precedent over the needs of students so those in positions of power get to allocate funding to whatever it is they deem to be important.

Having lived through the experience of being silenced, having been put in my place, I could not inflict such a humiliating experience on others. I wanted to ensure that my research would respect and give voice to those who have been silenced, those “who have been unjustly dealt with, deprived of their voice” (Freire, 1989, p. 176). In addition, I did not believe my vantage point was the only place from which to view the research. I did not want to be like those who silenced my voice, so preoccupied with their own point of view, so as to not see what was really taking place.

Elliot Eisner (1991) argues in the *Enlightened Eye* that the “self is the instrument that engages the situation and makes sense of it” (p. 34). Eisner understands that

qualitative researchers seek “the meaning events have for those who experience them” (p. 35). It is not solely the researcher who brings meaning to the research in narrative inquiry, various participants bring meaning to the research as well. Therefore, it is essential participants have the opportunity to have their voice heard and understood from their point of view. Narrative inquiry recognizes and honors this need to give voice to the silenced.

The more I read and considered possible research methods, the more clearly I reasoned that narrative inquiry was the most effective and appropriate method of research to use in working towards solving my research puzzle. The holistic nature of narrative inquiry honored First Nations’ longstanding oral traditions and gave voice to research participants. As a result, I conducted my narrative inquiry by listening to the stories and multiple points of view of students, parents, teachers, administrators, a caretaker, an artistic director, and Elders. Like Hanohanoh (2001), I knew it would take

a certain sensitivity to be aware of all of these things, especially the needs of those around us, and to put them at ease, even in very formal ritualized settings. It is this sensitivity that sets Indigenous re-search apart from mainstream research, and it is my hope that this sensitivity is reflected in this narrative inquiry. (p. 50)

### ***Research was Ceremony***

In reference to Indigenous people, Hanohano (2001) states that, “[f]or them research was a ceremony – a most serious undertaking, requiring great personal sacrifice and, at times, much physical, emotional and mental exertion, and sometimes suffering” (p. 51). I have had the good fortunate of meeting with my share of pain and suffering in my life. The challenges I faced taught me more about myself and the world in which we live than any schooling. My lived experience made me who I am. It shaped the direction

of my life and the actions I took, both good and bad. As a result, I came to my research with the desire to learn and understand through experience how making and playing a PVC version of the Native American Flute while learning the culture and history of the instrument and its people was impacting my students. Even more important was the fact that I wanted to conduct my research in the most culturally appropriate and respectful manner, as Hanohano (2001) brought forward in his work.

*He alo a he alo (face to face)*

That's how you learn about what makes us weep.

*He alo a he alo (face to face)*

That's how you learn about what makes us bleed.

*He alo a he alo (face to face)*

That's how you learn about what makes us feel.

what makes us work.

what makes us sing.

what makes us bitter.

what makes us fight.

what makes us laugh.

what makes us stand against the wind.

what makes us sit in the flow of power.

what makes us, us.

Not from a distance.

Not from miles away

Not from a book

Not from an article you read

Not from the newspaper

Not from what somebody told you

Not from a “reliable source”

Not from a cliff

Not from a cave

Not from your reality

Not from your darkness, but

*He alo a he alo* (face to face)

Or, else,

*Pa’a kou ka waha* (shut tight, your mouth)

*‘A’ ohe a kahi nana o luna o ka pali:*

*iho mai a lalo nei*

*‘ike I ke au nui ke au iki;*

*he alo a he alo.*

(The top of the cliff isn’t the place to look at us;

come down here and learn of the big and little current,

face to face.)

And come and help us dig, the lo’i, deep.

(Puanani Burgess, 1993 in Hanohano, 2001, p. 65)

My lived teaching experience at core neighborhood schools made me realize this was how I needed to conduct my research. Like Burgess so eloquently pointed out, I needed to continue what I have done – to learn “face to face” and “not from a distance.” I

needed to honor the children, their parents, their ancestors, their cultures, their traditions, and most importantly their ways of knowing.

The imposition of Eurocentric models of learning, living, and rule, that Aboriginal people have been subjected to for hundreds of years under colonialism (RCAP, 1996), has led to the dysfunction that many find themselves in today (Cuthand, 2006). As a result, I made the conscious choice to remain grounded in literature that honors Indigenous epistemology, Aboriginal ways of knowing. The voices of my research participants led me to believe it would not be appropriate to impose a Eurocentric world view on the research I was conducting. As a result, I have explored music as “medicine” in the Aboriginal sense, rather than in a therapeutic sense. The Canadian Association for Music Therapy (CAMT) (2007) defines Music Therapy as

the skillful use of music and musical elements by an accredited music therapist to promote, maintain, and restore mental, physical, emotional, and spiritual health.

Music has nonverbal, creative, structural, and emotional qualities. These are used in the therapeutic relationship to facilitate contact, interaction, self-awareness, learning, self-expression, communication, and personal development. (p. 1)

Although there is an extremely large body of research in the area of using music therapeutically (British Journal of Music Therapy, Canadian Journal of Music Therapy, Journal of Music Therapy, Music Therapy Perspectives, Music Therapy Today, Voices, Arts in Psychotherapy, Bulletin of the National Association for Music Therapy, International Journal of Arts Medicine, Journal of the Association for Music and Imagery, Music Perception, Psychomusicology, etc.), without accreditation as a Music Therapist, I chose “to look down roads not taken” (Greene, 1995, p. 5). I chose to take a

road that reflects my travels as a music educator, that honors Indigenous ways of knowing, and that resonates with the voices of my participants.

## CHAPTER 5

### Site and Time of the Research Inquiry

An urban Aboriginal high school in Saskatchewan was the research site for my narrative inquiry. The school administration first welcomed me for my first phase of research from January 4 to March 17, 2006. After this period of time, they deemed the Songs of the Spirit curriculum was so successful with students that they invited me to team-teach two classes of students at the beginning of the third trimester. I agreed to this invitation, as I thought it would provide more valuable information to my research. I taught an additional nineteen days until Easter break, from March 20 to April 13, 2006.

The school's student demographic mirrored the schools I have experienced teaching in, with virtually all of the students being Aboriginal.

Soaring Eagle School of Excellence is for students of aboriginal ancestry. The school stresses personal growth and accomplishment. It also provides students with the opportunity to recapture their aboriginal identity and cultural aspects of the Plains Cree people. Soaring Eagle School of Excellence was established in 1981 as the Native Survival School Society. An agreement was struck between provincial Education, City Schools and the *Miskasowin* Council. *Soaring Eagle*, from *Miskasowin* Reserve, was the first Elder of the school. His dedication to the building of relationships between students and staff developed the spiritual direction of the school. To honour him, the name of the school was changed to Soaring Eagle School of Excellence in 1989. (Soaring Eagle Student Handbook [SESH], 2005, p. 3)

Soaring Eagle has since passed away. The current Elders' messages go on to say:

This is a healing school. It takes a long time to learn to open up as a young person. We open to our children here like this (arms opened wide). It's very important. (Alo Apenimon,<sup>18</sup> In SESH, 2005, p. 3)

I have a lot of respect for what this school is trying to do for its students. A lot of patience is shown as they struggle with daily problems. We also try to accommodate the cultural and spiritual needs of our students. We open the doors to youth for things they might have missed out on in the city. It's healthy that they learn to know the different Elders. From there they can choose what is comfortable to them. (Onida Shimasani,<sup>19</sup> In SESH, 2005, p. 3)

The school's mission statement states, "The purpose of education at Soaring Eagle School of Excellence is to provide a safe stable environment that enables students to experience academic success and personal healing. This is encouraged by maintaining balance in all aspects of life: mind, body, emotion and spirit" (p. 4).

The school has a nutrition program that provides breakfast, morning snacks and lunch to students at no cost. There is an expectation that students will clean up after themselves in order to maintain the privilege of participating in the nutrition program. Students who help with the setup and take down chairs, put out milk and condiments, etc. can earn a bus pass. "Students who maintain a 90% attendance through the month are presented with a bus pass at no cost" (p. 16). The school also has an attendance policy

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<sup>18</sup> Alo is a Hopi word meaning "spiritual guide" and Apenimon is a Native American word meaning "worthy of trust." These words are being used to reflect how, as I witnessed at ceremonies, the school administration, staff, and students looked up to and trusted this Elder to be the school's spiritual guiding force.

<sup>19</sup> Onida is a Native American name meaning "the one searched for" and Shimasani is a Navajo word meaning "grandmother." These words are being used to reflect how this elder, in our conversations, provided the answers to many of my questions.

that requires students to attend a minimum of 80% in each of their three classes or they may be placed into the “re-entry” class. The re-entry class “offers support to students in all areas of personal growth. The focus is to enhance the four areas of the medicine wheel so that students may become successful in the regular academic program. Students may earn back an absence by attending two tutorials and catching up on their missed work” (SESH, 2005, p.16). The school is set up in a caring way that enables students to have access to the Elders, student services, and addiction counseling even if they fall off roll because of poor attendance.

### **Ethical Considerations**

Honoring First Nations people, cultures, ways of knowing, “sacred space and traditional knowledge” (Canadian Institutes of Health Research, 2007) were of primary importance to me in conducting my research at Soaring Eagle School of Excellence. I practiced traditional protocol of offering tobacco to Elders, school administration, and Aboriginal people who shared themselves, their knowledge, or their expertise throughout the research. I used consent and assent forms with participants involved in recorded conversations. I transcribed all recorded conversations and I returned to each individual their transcripts so they could verify an accurate portrayal of their point of view in the research. I used pseudonyms in place of the names of students, parents, staff members and the school to ensure anonymity of those involved in the research and to protect them from harm. I shared research texts attributed to specific research participants with them to ensure the voice of the research co-participants was heard with integrity in the final research document.

### *White Man in a Red Man's World*

It is not always easy to walk the line between supporting Aboriginal students and ensuring I'm not acting in a paternalistic, "I've got all the answers," way. I find I can easily get caught up in the practicality of situations and end up getting a sort of tunnel vision when I focus on what needs to get done to provide positive learning opportunities for students. I am sure that on different occasions I made errors and likely offended some parents. Even so, with my continued effort to provide opportunities for students, I came to feel very accepted by both the students and their parents.

I gradually learned about First Nations cultures and traditions through teaching at Pleasant Hill Community School. I made it my practice to seek out the advice of Elders and the opinions of other Aboriginal people whom I trusted and respected. The first person I did this with was Roland Duquette, the Elder at Pleasant Hill Community School. Prior to asking for Roland's advice and guidance, I talked with Theresa Fidler, one of my Aboriginal colleagues, to learn about the proper protocol. Theresa taught me I should buy some tobacco and present it to our Elder prior to asking my questions. Somehow in the experience of presenting the tobacco privately to Roland and asking my questions, there was a holiness about it, what I would call a spiritual quality to the experience.

Even though I followed protocol when I negotiated my entry into Soaring Eagle School of Excellence and I was openly accepted by the Elders, staff and students, I had a nagging question at the back of my head. As I conducted my research, I felt the need to ask a couple of my research participants what they thought about me, a white teacher, coming in and teaching students how to make a PVC version of the Native American Flute.

I think it's alright for you to be able to do what you do because you feel that comfort with them and the young people that you interview feel that comfort with you. So I would see no disconnect for you. I think you are a part of that group and so, um, as you teach your knowledge, as you share it regarding that flute, is right on in the way that I see you interact with people. You give them a good grounding and understanding of where that flute comes from and how they can play it. You know. So I think it's much like the way I did it with my Hoop Dance instruction and I can only use that as a relation to what you're doing and I can relate to what you're doing and I would say, if I was in that place to teach Hoop dance, and a non-Aboriginal man was very interested and very close to native culture, then I think that it is okay for that non-Aboriginal man to step into my moccasins to do that, you know. So I think if you have the knowledge, why not teach it? ... You have the heart and in our culture there are many stories of the non-First Nations people taking on aspects of culture and living it, and being conscientized and understanding about those ways and they live those ways, you know. They take on that spirit I suppose, you know, of the people. And because people are accepting, they just embrace the person, they look past the moonias-hood or the white-hood or the white essence of a person you know. They look at the spirit. And that's what counts, is spirit. (Hania Maska, Recorded conversation, February 27, 2006, pp. 13-15)

**Richard:** And do you think it matters whether the person trying to bring that gift, to share that gift, whether they are Aboriginal or not?

**Onida Shimasani:** To me it doesn't matter. I am one of the easier people that you are ever gonna meet in your journey as a cultural advisor. I will probably be one of the easiest that you will ever deal with. Because I am very open minded. I wasn't put here to segregate and I talk about that. To segregate different tribes or different people. Because you are not Aboriginal, it does not give me a right for you not to teach here. You know, I don't have that right. You have a gift and you are gonna share it. That's what we take from you. Because we need to grasp back and take back those things into our students. And who does it, as long as you are perfecting your job by all means, you know. I honor you for coming here, and doing that. (Onida Shimasani, Recorded conversation, February 27, 2006, p. 37)

In my work, I have always heard the Elders speak in this accepting manner regarding non-First Nations people. I believe it is because of their Indigenous way of seeing the world and people as interconnected and in relationship. First Nations people who are in tune with their culture have a way of looking beyond the surface, beyond the “white essence of a person.” In Hania’s words, “They look at the spirit.”

### **Research Partners**

#### ***Students, Parents, Elders, Teachers, Administrators, and Caretaker***

My primary research partners included three students, two parents, two Elders, two teachers, and two administrators from Soaring Eagle School of Excellence. I also included four secondary research partners. Three of them offered a long-term view of how students reacted to learning how to make and play the Northern Spirit Flute, while the final partner had inspired the creation of the volunteer based Heart of the City Piano Program. Chesmu Akecheta was principal at Westmount Community School when I taught there for three years while Wicasa Langundo, was the head caretaker. Kenneth

Charlette, Artistic Director for the Saskatchewan Native Theatre Company (SNTC), worked with me a number of times over the past five years, and inspired a couple of my young flute students with his wisdom. Kachina Anaba, a former grade five student from the fall of 1995, and the inspiration for Heart of the City Piano Program, is now the mother of a child I am currently teaching.

The three student participants, recommended by the cultural arts teacher because of regular attendance, all shared a similar background of having attended multiple schools within the city and on their reserves. Parents of the three student participants were invited to participate in the study. Two agreed to have recorded conversations with me. Both parent participants are single mothers raising multiple children, with one parent attending school and the other working full time. Both First Nations teachers are living their culture. One is working on recapturing her language, while the other is well known for his hoop dancing, singing, and drumming skills. The Elders are an integral part of the school, providing leadership for ceremonies and cultural events. They also offer traditional teachings, guidance, and advice to students, teachers, staff, administration, and guests. The school administrators are very caring and patient men who are in tune with the lived lives of their students.

I had three conversations with each student, parent, and administrator over the course of the research. I held two conversations with the teachers and each Elder. I had one conversation with Chesmu Akecheta, Wicasa Langundo, Kenneth Charlette, and Kachina Anaba. All of the conversations helped inform the research, providing some insights and answers, while at times raising more questions and wonders.

### *Negotiating My Entry With Research Participants*

In October 2005, I had my first meeting at Soaring Eagle School of Excellence with Elan Guyapi<sup>20</sup>, the Vice-principal, and Alo Apenimon, one of the school's Elders. Elan and Alo thought this project would be a good experience for the students and both gave me their blessing to conduct my research starting in January.

Prior to starting my research at Soaring Eagle, I also met and spoke with Sakima Qulaetaqa, the principal, and asked him for his advice on how to approach potential research partners. He suggested I approach the school's two Elders individually and ask them if they were comfortable with having recorded conversations with me. He said Onawa Gaho<sup>21</sup>, the teacher I would be working with, would know which students and families in her class would be good candidates for the research. I invited Sakima to be a part of the research during this meeting and he happily agreed to have recorded conversations with me about the impact of the Songs of the Spirit curriculum. At this time, I also invited Elan Guyapi to have recorded conversations and he was also pleased to oblige.

I was pleased both Elders came into the classroom to participate in making their own flute along with the students. This made me feel more at ease and comfortable about approaching them to participate in recorded conversations as I felt they had a better idea

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<sup>20</sup> Elan is a Native American word meaning "friendly" and Guyapi means "frank or candid." These words are being used to represent the vice-principal because I was always impressed with how friendly, frank, and honest he was during our conversations, as well as with students.

<sup>21</sup> Onawa is a Native American name that means "wide awake" and Gaho is a Native American name that means mother. Onawa is being used to reflect how this teacher is wide awake to her culture and history. Gaho is being used to reflect how she is a very caring mother of her own children and, in her teaching, provides many First Nations teachings that would have traditionally been passed on by mothers to their children.

of what I was teaching the students and how I worked with young people. Both Elders were very welcoming over the course of my teaching and research.

Onawa, the teacher I was working with, taught Cultural Arts since the beginning of the second trimester. She knew her students very well and suggested three students who had good attendance as potential research partners. I explained my research in greater detail to them and let them know I would also like to have conversations with their parents. Two out of three parents agreed to have me come over and explain the research in greater detail, while one parent gave permission for her child, Aleshanee Ominotago, to become a participant, although she did not want to be involved herself. Upon meeting with Shima Anevay<sup>22</sup> and Anna Hantaywee<sup>23</sup>, they both gave assent for their children, Shysie Kiwidinok<sup>24</sup> and Lenmana Alsmoose respectively, to participate, as well as their consent to participate in the research themselves.

I asked Onawa, after class in the first week, if she would become a research participant and have recorded conversations with me. She agreed, telling me she had conducted research for her master's degree through narrative inquiry as well. I met with Hania Maska,<sup>25</sup> a male First Nations staff member well-grounded in his Cree culture, after school one day and invited him to have recorded conversations for my research. I

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<sup>22</sup> Shima is a Navajo word meaning "mother" and Anevay is a Native American name meaning "superior." These names are being used to reflect this mother's superior parenting skills that I came to know through our conversations.

<sup>23</sup> Anna is an Algonquin word meaning "mother" and Hantaywee is a Sioux word meaning "faithful." These names are being used to reflect how this caring mother interacted with her four children throughout the course of our conversations and was always faithful to meeting the needs of her family.

<sup>24</sup> Shysie is a Native American word that means "silent little one" and Kiwidinok is a Chippewa word that means "woman of the wind." Shysie is being used to represent the shyness and very quiet nature of this student participant. Kiwidinok is being used to represent how this student participant was so excited and eager to make and play her Northern Spirit Flute.

<sup>25</sup> Hania is a Hopi name meaning "spirit warrior" and Maska is a Native American name meaning "strong." These words are being used to represent the strong, extremely well-grounded, spiritual ways and wisdom of this Cree man.

explained that I thought he would see things from a different vantage point and that his cultural expertise would be a very valuable addition to the research.

During the course of the research, I reflected on my past experience with teaching students how to make and play the Northern Spirit Flutes. In reflecting on past conversations with former colleagues, I contacted Chesmu Akecheta, my former principal, and Wicasa Langundo, the caretaker at Westmount Community School, to ask if they would each have a recorded conversation with me about how, from their vantage point, the Northern Spirit Flutes impacted students. Both were happy to accommodate my request.

I also made the decision to include research from a conversation I had with Kennetch Charlette, Artistic Director of the Saskatchewan Native Theatre Company. I conducted a conversation with Kennetch as part of class work for my Applied Native Studies Research class in December 2005. Kennetch was pleased to make time to have a conversation with me about his work in theatre and how he saw the arts empowering Aboriginal youth.

The last person I contacted was Kachina Anaba, my former student, now a young mother, who had inspired the Heart of the City Piano Program. Because I also put her daughter into the piano program, I thought she would bring a unique voice to the research. Kachina kindly agreed to have a recorded conversation with me.

### **My Roles: Positioning Myself On the Educational Landscape**

I took on the multiple roles of teacher, staff member, and researcher while at Soaring Eagle School of Excellence, spending two to five half days per week during the research period. In my role as teacher, I guided students through the process of learning

how to make and play a PVC version of the Native American Flute via the Songs of the Spirit Native American Flute curriculum. As a staff member, I worked alongside the staff of Soaring Eagle School of Excellence, assisting as needed when I was not directly teaching. As researcher, I shifted between participant and observer (Spradley in Pushor, 2001, p.46) as needed; observing, taking field notes, writing in a reflective journal, and writing field notes. I conducted recorded conversations with students, parents, teachers, Elders, and administrators. Conversations were professionally transcribed in full then given back to research participants for verification and clarification to ensure participants' thoughts were being accurately portrayed in the research. Conversations with participants shaped and guided the unfolding nature of the research, influencing what literature was read and what further conversations and observations were planned. Transcripts were read and reread in the process of analysis and interpretation, laid alongside field notes and field texts to enable common threads to rise to the surface. Common threads were compiled in separate documents, then re-analyzed during the writing process.

For a non-Aboriginal person, I consider myself fairly knowledgeable about First Nations cultures. If there are things I do not know, I am always respectful and remain open and eager to learn. This eagerness to be in touch with and learn more about First Nations cultures and traditions is what drew me to wanting to conduct my research at Soaring Eagle School of Excellence. I felt I had been well prepared by my work at Pleasant Hill Community School, with the Heart of the City Piano Program, with the Circle of Peace, and with the summer program. I had over ten years of experience working with Aboriginal students and believed I had gained a very good understanding of

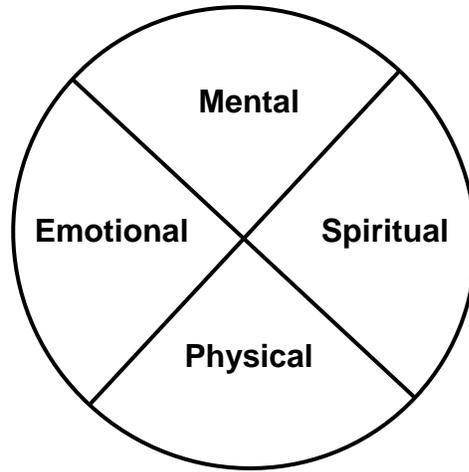
and respect for the cultures and traditions of my students. I knew from my life's experiences there were many more ways of being in the world than the way I had been taught. This made the transition into Soaring Eagle a comfortable one for me, though I found out I had much to learn about the Medicine Wheel and Tipi Teachings.

Elan Guyapi, the assistant principal, gave me a copy of the school's student handbook at our first meeting to negotiate my entry into Soaring Eagle. When I started going through the handbook, I began to see how the Medicine Wheel and Tipi Teachings provided the foundation and guiding principles upon which Soaring Eagle School of Excellence was built. The Medicine Wheel was used to highlight, in a number of ways, the importance of addressing all four aspects of our being – the physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual. The Tipi Teachings were also listed in the student handbook and they were posted throughout the school. They, as well as other cultural knowledge and traditions, are taught in the traditional way by Elder Onida Shimasani. I became cognizant there are fifteen Tipi Teachings that are interconnected within the Cree culture. As I synthesized my research and wrote my thesis, I was struck by the coincidence, or stroke of fate, that I also had fifteen research participants. As a result, I felt compelled to conduct more research about the Medicine Wheel and the Tipi Teachings and how they related to the Songs of the Spirit curriculum.

## CHAPTER 6

### *The Medicine Wheel*

The Medicine Wheel exists in a number of First Nations cultures and has been adopted and adapted by other Indigenous people for their own use because it reflects many of their own cultural teachings. The Medicine Wheel is used as a visual example of a holistic perspective that encompasses



*Figure 1.* Four aspects of one's being. SESH , 2005

“intellectual, embodied, emotional, [and] spiritual ways of knowing and being. Tillson (2002) says that “[o]ne of the main tools used by the Aboriginal community is the Medicine Wheel, an ancient holistic approach to healing ailments of the mind, body and spirit that explains illness as springing from an imbalance of being” (p.13).

The hundreds of wheels “used by various tribes - are a complex network of ideas, symbols and philosophies” (p. 13). Some are

depicted within concentric metaphorical circles. The outer circle represents the dark side of existence, the middle circle is the positive side and the centre is the spiritual fire that is life's core. The Wheel is divided into north, south, east and west doors, each associated with thoughts, feelings, time periods and sacred elements. (p. 13)

I grew to understand that each First Nations culture using the Medicine Wheel has its own interpretation and teachings to accompany it. I narrowed my focus to the Cree

worldview and their Medicine Wheel teachings as Soaring Eagle has been grounded in the Cree culture since its inception.

### ***Relationship***

During my research, I was reminded of how the Cree people believe the world and everything in it is sacred and that the number four has a special significance. I recognized how this number is reflected in the four quadrants of the Medicine Wheel and is referred to through teachings such as the *Four Directions*. I awoke to the fact that I would have to look beyond the obvious orientations of north, south, east, and west, “to look through others’ eyes” (Greene, 1995, p. 86), in order to gain a more in-depth understanding of the Medicine Wheel. I had to embrace other ways of “knowing” than those I learned throughout my schooling, to look beyond this limiting intellectual approach to knowledge. “The Four Directions represent the *interconnectedness* of the universe and all its elements: plants, animals, humans and the environment in which they live” (Lee, 2006, p.1). Cree people see the world as

a moving, changing, life force in which birth and death are natural and necessary processes. Balance is maintained through the interdependency of the life forces.

The validity of this view rests on the knowledge of the fundamental relationships and patterns at play in the world. (p.1)

I was reminded again of how relationships and interconnectedness in all of life play such a key role in First Nations worldview and in how I have come to see the world. I found this Indigenous view reinforced by Hanohano (2001) as he describes how

[i]ndividual responsibility for actions must be in relation to all living organisms. It is this web of relationship with each individual in the centre that stretches out in

all directions. This is our understanding of how the universe is held together. We believe that the interconnection among all living organisms is essential for all life forms. The connections must be respected and honored. (Hanohano, 2001, pp. 54-55)

This importance of relationship and interconnectedness, both the inward and the outward, was a recurring theme throughout the research. Students connected inwardly to their spirit and innermost emotions, while at the same time they felt a strong need to share their experience with the flute with others. One student wrote about outward relationships and connections, “I can’t wait to take [my flute] home and show my sister what I made in school” (Student Journal Writing, March 2006). Other students wrote in their journals that they wanted to complete their flute so they could take them home to share them outwardly with parents, siblings, or friends.

I am looking forward to learning how to play. Because I will be able to play for my mom, brother, and baby sister or brother on the way. (Student Journal Writing, March 2006)

I felt so good because it was cool that I was making my very first flute then someday I’ll teach my grandkids or something. (Student Journal Writing, March 2006)

I like to learn new songs and play the new songs to my family. (Student Journal Writing, March 2006)

And I can’t wait till they’re all done so I can show my family what I’ve done. (Student Journal Writing, March 2006)

I can play the flute with my cousin and play for my other friends. I think it will be fun to show people how good I can play and how much songs I know. (Student Journal Writing, March 2006)

My cousin knows how to play and I want to play the flute with him. (Student Journal Writing, March 2006)

The flute seemed to awaken something inside students, in such a way, they were intrinsically motivated to share outwardly the inner sense of joy and excitement they felt with people they cared for. When I entered into conversation with Shima Anevay<sup>26</sup>, she told me of how having the flute in her home led to her daughter Shysie<sup>27</sup> teaching her younger sister Aponi<sup>28</sup> because she was “really wanting to learn how to play” (Shima Anevay, Recorded conversation, March 18, 2006, p.2). From her positioning as parent, she felt proud of Shysie for the level of mastery she had achieved on the flute. She told me the humorous story of how



at first when [Shysie] was playing here too she wouldn't let me watch her so I would have to listen like out here [from the kitchen] or something. And then I started coaxing her, “Please let me watch you play,” and so I was in the room with her but I couldn't look at her. So I had to sit there with my eyes closed while she was playing. . . But when her sister was in there and they were taking turns playing, it wasn't so bad. She wasn't so shy. (p. 3)

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<sup>26</sup> Shima is a Navajo word meaning mother and Anevay means superior. These words are being used to recognize the loving, caring nature of this parent participant.

<sup>27</sup> Shysie is a Native American word that means silent little one. This word is being use to represent the shyness and very quiet nature of this student participant.

<sup>28</sup> Aponi is a Native American word that means butterfly. I use it to reflect that I repeatedly crossed paths with Aponi, the younger sister of Shysie. She also attends Soaring Eagle and was home when I had conversations with Shima, her mother.

I was fascinated at hearing how having the Northern Spirit Flute in the home led to all kinds of positive interactions between family members. In a later conversation with Kachina, she explained that, from her parent point of view, she thought the flute gave her daughter Asheni<sup>29</sup> “[s]omething positive . . . to do after school rather than watch TV all the time. . . [b]ecause they can take it with them [a]nd they can practice with friends. Like I know when Asheni practices with Aponi it makes a big difference” (Kachina, Recorded conversation, May 10, 2006, pp.2-20). I had no idea that Aponi was connected in some way to Kachina’s family. The relational aspect of the Medicine Wheel teachings and how we are all connected really hit home. By my teaching Shysie how to make and play the flute, she taught her sister Aponi, who then in turn helped to teach Asheni. I even found out later that Asheni then helped teach her younger brother how to play a little on the flute as well. I was taken by how, like a ripple in the water, the beauty and teachings of the flute continued to flow beyond the source. I then awoke to the fact that I, too, was but a single ripple in the flow of the history of the Native American Flute. I thought to myself, “What a wonderful way to be connected and in relationship with each other.”

***Four Aspects of Self and Life’s Healing Journey***

Prior to doing research at Soaring Eagle, I knew vaguely the First Nations concept of the four stages of life. The conversations I had with my participants directed me to seek a more in-depth

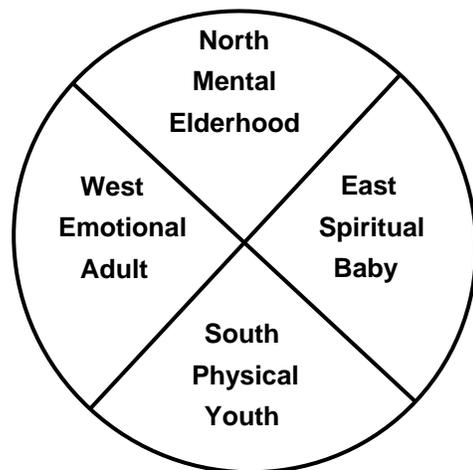


Figure 2. Four Directions four aspects of self

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<sup>29</sup> Asheni is a Cree word that means angel. I use it to reflect that Kachina’s daughter has an angelic innocence about her.

understanding of this concept. I learned the Cree people believe the spirit is created at conception and that life's journey consists of four stages: infant, child, adolescent, and adult (Lee, 2006, p.2). Throughout life's journey, we develop the four *aspects of self*: mental, physical, emotional, and spiritual. These are seen as gifts from the Creator and require attention to "maintain a healthy balance of self in all respects" (p. 2). Lee describes in more detail the Cree people's view of the Medicine Wheel and its relation to life.

The Eastern quadrant represents the beginning of a new day - a new life - and just as the sun rotates in a clockwise direction to the south, west and north, movement on the Medicine Wheel flows in the same direction. The baby is represented by the east; youth is represented by the south; adulthood is represented by the west, and *elderhood* is represented by the north. Similarly, the spiritual element of self is associated with the east. The spiritual connection to the baby in the eastern quadrant of the wheel comes from its birth from spirit. The youth's association with the physical aspect of self comes from the growth that takes place during this stage and the natural physical activity of children and adolescents. Adulthood is associated with the emotional aspect of self. Maturity brings the awareness of feelings and the confidence to express emotion. Life experience gives adults a broad perspective to better understand the world and the journey everyone walks. Adulthood provides the gift of recognizing what is important and the skill to provide what is necessary to live well and to be happy and healthy. This knowledge is what enables adults to make good parents. Elderhood is the fourth and final stage in the cycle of life and is associated with the mental aspect of self.

This connection comes from the *wisdom* of age and experience. With less responsibility at this stage of life for looking after children and more time to reflect on life from a philosophical view, elders develop a superior mental awareness. (p. 2)

As I read and reread the four aspects of self, I found my thinking resonated with the teachings. I thought of how I looked to the Elders and senior teaching mentors for advice and teachings. I remembered a conversation with Elder Onida Shimasani when she explained the teaching in how the drum was strung. The string connects from the east, or baby, to the west, representing the adult. The drum is then strung to the south, representing the youth, and on to the north, Elderhood. She explained that as youth are trying to grow into adulthood they tend to come in conflict with their parents as they try to discover their own identity, so the grandmothers known as *kohkoms*, and grandfathers, known as *moshoms*, assist in raising the youth because the youth are more open to listening to the Elders, as they are not seen as being as controlling as their parents.

I was drawn back to the time at Pleasant Hill when we had an Elder's program at the school. I recalled how the Elders were very effective in connecting with students, especially when teachers were being viewed more as parent figures. I then moved forward in time, remembering how Onida told me she always kept her door open so that students could come and speak with her. She went on to describe how she gave the student a chair to sit on while she went about her work, often sewing gloves or moccasins, because "then [her] hands [were] comfortable, [she could] think" (Onida Shimasani, Recorded conversation, March 14, 2006, p. 3). She gave the student the

opportunity to calm down and make the first move to open up a dialogue. Onida said she observed that students used the flute in the same way that she used her sewing.

I notice with the students is sort of that buddy system with their flute. It's sort of like somebody that you can carry with you and be with you. Because I notice they carry their flutes around a lot. It's with them all the time. . . And even sitting in the stairway towards the gym there and just playing it, softly by themselves. . . And to me that sort of that self-counseling. It is the same that I do with my sewing.

(Recorded conversation, March 14, 2006, pp. 2-3)

Elder Onida alluded to a healing quality when she spoke of “self-counseling.” I was drawn back to my first conversation with Elder Alo Apenimon. We had our first conversation after I had played the Northern Spirit Flute at a “large circle” gathering, similar to a school assembly but built around ceremony. The whole school gathered in the gym for the ceremony. The student body and staff formed a large circle around the perimeter of the gym while Elder Alo led the activities from a smaller inner circle. He invited me to be a part of the inner circle and play the flute as part of the ceremony. I smudged myself along with the others and Alo smudged my flute to cleanse it before I played. After the ceremony, I approached Alo to sign consent forms and arrange a time to meet. He signed the consent forms and said it would be good to have a conversation right away. He began the conversation by talking about his own personal healing journey.

When a person starts their healing journey, like me. One of the Elders told me there are seven fires I can use for my healing journey. And also was mentioned is the, the music and also the drum we use and the song. And also dancing is one of the very important. Like playing also, we play the music. And also, when you talk

about your problem, when you have emotions, feelings inside you. And when you hear the music of the drum, right away that healing starts inside you. You know when they listen the, the whistles [flutes]. You know it's something that, a message, sent to the universe and also the creation. One of the Elders told me there's lot of things here to learn from even when you listen – the wind, and the trees the leaves. You can learn the song and music from there. And also we used to make this kind of music with the, I don't know how you call that plant. Oh it's about five six feet high, about there. An inch, and I don't know over an inch in diagonal. I know we used to make that a long time ago but we didn't know anything about the music, about this whistle [flute]. And today, hmm [clear throat] when you listen [pause] an uh, some place there's no machine we or anything that (makes) noise, just the animals, the birds in the spring time where I come from. I used to listen, going out one area. There's all kinds of birds, ducks now, and you name those. You used have these things. Noise and the music. And I used to like to go there with my drum. But this music also, when you're sitting on the top the hill, one of the young men told me that he wanted to learn this music [flute], like this in the States in the mountains. He was sitting there. I think that was in the, Grand Canyon in the States. That's where they play this music [flute]. And it was made, the music and different, different, different songs, different how they play. This is something they. My grand daughter about a year ago they learned this, how to play music [flute]. And used to teach me how to when I had a chance to make one for her. Maybe someday I could learn how. Maybe even my grandchildren could learn. Maybe my great grandchildren they

could play those music [flute music] and the healing through there. This is what uh, I'm very interested about. (Alo Apenimon, Recorded conversation, February 6, 2006, pp. 1-2)

Our conversation revealed that I had taught Alo's granddaughter how to make and play a Northern Spirit Flute the previous year at Westmount Community School. He had not only heard her play the flute, but it had inspired him to want to learn how to play, as well. Alo expressed that he wished the opportunity to play the flute for his grandchildren and great grandchildren. Once again, the Indigenous worldview of relationship and the interconnectedness resonated deeply within me. I was struck by how Alo and I were connected and in relation before we even met for my research. As a parent concerned for my children's future, I related deeply to Alo's desire that there be opportunities for his grandchildren and great grandchildren. As I read and reread Elder Alo's words, I became mindful of how he began our conversation by speaking about his healing journey and concluded that part of our conversation by speaking about how he was "very interested in" his grandchildren and great grandchildren having the opportunity to learn how to play the flute and have "healing through" the flute.

I remembered how both parent participants spoke to me about how they enjoyed listening to the Native American Flute. They said it helped them to feel less stressed out. Shima Anevay said she like listening to her CD of Native American Flute music to relax while driving.

I have a CD that I bought and it's flutes. And I basically bought it for myself and when I am driving it gets so hectic and I found that it was soothing for me and I didn't feel so stressed out driving. And um, then my kids started, like they started

listening to it and took over my CD so I don't even have it anymore. (Shima Aneway, March 6, 2006, p. 13)

I found it interesting that Shima appreciated the soothing sound of the flute and in turn her children were so drawn to the music that they had taken ownership of the disc.

Anna Hantaywee, my second parent participant, had suffered every parent's nightmare. Her son died a year prior to the study. She told me in one of our first conversations that she would put on a CD of Native American Flute music for her children to listen to as they went to bed and when they awoke in the morning to bring a calmness to the house. I was moved deeply when Anna Hantaywee shared with me that she no longer put the CD on at night because her daughter Lenmana played her flute instead as she went to bed.



She plays the flute almost every single night now and so it's good for our family, it's soothing and, um, a lot of times I am falling asleep listening to her play the flute instead of me playing it on the CD player. So, it's good. I am happy that she learned and I think she's happy too that she learned. I think that's why she continues to play it. (Anna Hantaywee, Recorded conversation, March 19, p. 3)

Both Shima and Anna described listening to the flute as "soothing." For Shima it helped de-stress her as she drove, while for Anna it soothed the sense of loss and suffering that she was still experiencing from the death of her son. Other participants also used the word "soothing" repeatedly throughout the research. As I looked more at the four quadrants of the Medicine Wheel, I found myself asking, "Does 'soothing' connect to spirit, to the physical, to the emotional, to the mental, to all four parts of the wheel, or

to some combination thereof? I wondered what the longer-term impact of having the flute as part of their lives might be.

### ***Balancing the Four Aspects of Being***

Soaring Eagle uses the four quadrants of the Medicine Wheel to guide how they work to meet the needs of their students, change how classes are offered rather than sticking with the semester system, adjust or create new curriculum, adjust the school day, and how they expect their students to take responsibility for their own actions. As I



*Figure 3. SESH, 2005*

reflected back to when I negotiated my entry into Soaring Eagle, I came to believe that the main reason Soaring Eagle welcomed me “with arms open wide” (Alo Apenimon, SESH, 2005, p.3) to work with their students was because they seek to address all four aspects of being.

During conversations with Sakima Qualetaqa, principal at Soaring Eagle, he stated repeatedly, they “try to balance the four areas of every student” (February 21, p. 30). Sakima went on to say

We use the medicine wheel to describe our belief system and, uh, spiritually the four quadrants, so spiritually every student must attend and respect the same way, that is our belief statement from our staff, our parents and our students and especially our elders. (p. 30)

Onida Shimasani also repeatedly spoke about balancing the physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual.

That's one of the reasons why this school is set up the way it is, to bring about that balance. Not only in students but for us too. . . . To bring out that balance, you need spirituality, you need that emotional, you need physical, you need all those, you need mental. . . . Mental is something that is over-used and sometimes physical. (Onida Shimasani, Recorded conversation, February 27, 2006, pp. 39-40)

[I]f you are going to balance a child, teaching a child, you have to have that [spirit]. (March 14, 2006, pp. 11-12)

No matter how rich we get in our journeys of knowledge we still need to balance. We still need to balance. Sometimes you are so off focus. Even I catch myself doing that. I used to love to work, very physical, very, very physical. But what I did was always run home and my mother always made sure I sat down and remembered the spiritual part of me, you know. If she hadn't have been there I'd have been. It's ok to be active, there's nothing wrong to be very active and a good worker and all that but there's other things in life too. There's other things in life. (February 27, p. 41)

Both Sakima and Onida clearly explained how their holistic view of the Medicine Wheel is central to Soaring Eagle's non-Eurocentric approach to teaching students. Students are always viewed in their entirety rather than solely by the mental part of their being – their academic success. Their focus is on students in the fullness of their being, their complex entirety. Sakima pointed out that at Soaring Eagle they believe that “mental

is one part, it's not the part" (February 21, 2006, p. 5). I believe this holistic view enables the school's staff to address the reality of students lived lives and the fact that many of their students are in need of the healing that Elders Onida and Alo speak of.

There's a lot of chaos in their lives in what's going on and so the flute, when its being played you know, or the kids are even able to play it 'cause they're learning, that's just, its kind of like a foreign entity that just comes in and brings, brings them down and calms them. It's just a peacefulness. That's what I've noticed with the kids like when you're playing, uh when we're in the large circle, I mean when you can quiet a large group of people by playing the flute, you know, I think there's a power there. And it's such a gentle power. And I really relate, you know this (is to get deep), but I really relate that to an Elder. 'Cause when an Elder is able to speak quietly and just speak and people will listen. (Sakima Qaletaqa, Recorded conversation, February 21, p.11)

Sakima equates the "gentle power" of the flute to an Elder. From where he sits around the circle of education, he recognizes how the flute connects with students in such a manner that they take notice, calm down, and listen. Sakima alludes to and seems to say that the flute touches an inner aspect of students' being when he hesitates and says "to get deep." It is this very type of holistic thinking based on the Medicine Wheel that enables a culturally-responsive curriculum to move beyond what has been and re-envision what can be a more meaningful and balanced education of the whole student. It is the thinking that supports the adaptation of the curriculum to the culture of the students rather than the adaptation of the students to the curriculum (Dewey 1931, 1934, 1938 & 1964; Freire, 1989; Giroux, 1997; Greene, 1995 & 1998; Grumet, 1999). This is a great leap forward in

addressing the inequitable history of exclusion from curriculum for Aboriginal people and giving voice to “persons who have been unjustly dealt with, [and] deprived of their voice” (Freire, 1989, p. 176).] I hear in the voices of people at Soaring Eagle a belief that the Northern Spirit Flute plays a part in giving voice back to those who have been silenced for so long, to those who have been so harmed that they are not yet able to use their speaking voice. I hear in their words that learning to make and play the flute can help students to feel empowered through the “gentle power” of the flute.

### *Nurturance for the Spirit*

Like Greene (1995), I believe education should always be “a source of nurturance for the spirit,” (p.86) rather than “a tedious and coercive activity, [that] can create frustrations that must emerge sooner or later in self-deprecation or cruelty to others” (p. 86). This is what led me to my journey with the Native American Flute. I lived through teaching curriculum that did not resonate with my students and led repeatedly to frustrations for both the students and myself. I could not continue to do what had failed them, for both our sakes. I was compelled to re-envision what the curriculum could be to meet the needs of my students - their most basic human needs. There needed to be joy. There needed to be something that could connect with the students in such a way they felt excited, yet at the same time safe enough to participate and allow themselves to be children again. There needed to be something that was relevant to who they were as human beings. There needed to be something that made them feel good about themselves, a sense of pride and self-esteem.

As a teacher, I have had the good fortune of experiencing my students totally engaged in what I am teaching as well as situations when they could care less about what

I had to offer. I have also experienced the many levels of interest somewhere between these two extremes. I realized, when I first played a Native American Flute for my students, there was something very special they were experiencing. Students who would regularly interrupt lessons were listening attentively. Students who were usually quite agitated and on edge calmed down. This was one of those moments where I knew I had them – all of them. I find it hard to describe such a moment because it's something that you just feel inside your gut. It's something you feel even more intensely if you've experienced living on the ice floes and working through the storm of unruliness where you've had to rein in some unbelievably chaotic classes.

Moving backward in time, I am reminded of one of those character-building situations when my frustration level was beyond any threshold I thought I could withstand. I was in the midst of trying to teach a boisterous grade five class, 75 percent boys, who were not in the least bit interested in singing or playing recorders. In the midst of what can only be kindly called sheer and utter chaos, a student piped up and asked loudly, "So when you leave, do the instruments stay?" The class went dead silent. All eyes turned to me as the students waited for my response. I knew full well that they were accustomed to teachers leaving after two or three years of teaching. The fighter in me retorted back firmly, without hesitation, "First of all, I'm going to be here long after you are done grade eight! And then, ten years or so down the road when they decide to move me to another school, I'm sure the next teacher will have the same training. The instruments will stay so that the new teacher can use them." In that moment, something changed. The class, finally silent for a few moments, took time to process what had been said. I can't honestly say I felt the students really treated me with much more respect for

the rest of that year. However, I felt there was some sort of begrudging acceptance of me as their teacher. If for nothing else, they appreciated the fact that I wasn't going to jump ship and abandon them from this seemingly quite leaky music boat we were all trying to stay afloat in, while we sailed together on our educational journey.

As I move forward in time, past the chaos that was my life as a second year teacher in an inner city school, I replay in my mind the many different experiences I have had teaching the Native American Flute and what my research participants said:

Yesterday was fun and exciting for me because when I first heard Mr. Dubé play his flute I really was interested in how to make one. I was kind of not wanting to drill the holes because I was scared I would mess up and I did but I was so glad that I could make another one. I just love the way the flute sounds. It's really calming. . . Today was just as fun as yesterday because I really like my design that I've drawn. . . . My flute is going to look awesome!! Thank you for coming and teaching us how to make these flutes. I can't wait till we learn how to actually play!! (Shysie, Journal Writing, January 18-19, 2006)

I felt addicted. I just wanted to play and play. . . Excited. I just wanna play and play. I took it home and was playing till bedtime and my mom and sister were just getting annoyed. It was fun. (Aleshanee, January 18-25, 2006)

I would really like to make my own because I enjoy playing the flute and because sometimes my sister doesn't share hers with me. I know that I could play a little bit better. Probably better than my sister and maybe I could get as good as you.

(Aponi, March 27, 2006)

I felt so good because it was cool that I was making my very first flute then someday I'll teach my grand kids or something. (Student Journal Writing, March 27, 2006)

I wrote they see the struggle but not the pain in Cree words. (Student Journal Writing, March 27, 2006)

I felt like a true Indian. (Student Journal Writing, March 27, 2006)

I think a flute is a very spiritual instrument of life. I would be spiritually stronger if I learned how to play a flute. (Student Journal Writing, March 27, 2006)

I came to believe that the Songs of the Spirit curriculum connected with students because it was addressing aspects of students' being that were not being met by other curriculum. It tapped into other ways of knowing. I came to think that the Songs of the Spirit curriculum connected so well with students because it works from a holistic Indigenous view that incorporates all aspects of being - the mental, physical, emotional, and spiritual that permeate throughout every aspect of not just school, but students' lived lives. By making flutes, creating an instrument connected to their own culture, they were validated as human beings and people, they were actively engaged in the physical – making the flute, the mental – designing and painting the flute, the emotional – playing and hearing what was played on the flute, and the spiritual – having the flute permeate the defensive shells they had put up to protect themselves. Students were empowered through the creation of a beauty to which they felt intrinsically connected.

### ***Today We Created Beauty***

As I've been writing my thesis, I have continued to wonder about what takes place when a whole school community shares in a positive aesthetic experience. One

such experience took place at the Remembrance Day assembly at my new school, Howard Coad. I felt intuitively that both teachers and students were moved by the experience that we shared in during that assembly. This intuitive knowing was affirmed by sincere compliments from staff members, students, and the principal throughout the day. I wrote the following piece as I reflected on our shared experience.

Today we created beauty. We filled the gym with the unquantifiable feelings of honour, respect, humility, thanks, wonder, awe, pride, and joy. None of what took place will show up on the battery of “academic” tests that we give to students. However, it will show up in the hearts, minds, bodies, and spirits of the students and adults who shared in that aesthetic experience. What was felt was emotions, plain and simple. From Dichali Ahote<sup>30</sup> marching in his cadet uniform, the choir singing beautifully, to Ezhno Bilagaana<sup>31</sup> playing the snare drum while I marched in to play the Last Post and Reveille on the trumpet, there was a sense of shared pride. It was an intrinsic feeling that we shared in a communal experience. Somehow, whether or not we were part of creating the beauty, we were all connected to the beauty and wonder of those shared moments and we all felt like we were part of the beauty. There was no technology that stood between us. It

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<sup>30</sup> Dichali is a Native American name that means “speaks a lot” and Ahote is a Hopi name that means “restless one.” They are being used to reflect the restless energy this grade eight student possesses. I have grown quite fond of him over the course of the year, though he does have difficulty containing his energetic talking.

<sup>31</sup> Ezhno is a Native American word that means “solitary” and Bilagaana is a Navajo word that means “white person.” These words are being used to reflect the solitary nature of this non-Aboriginal student and that he had lacked any sense of self-confidence when I first started to teach him how to play the snare drum. I point out that this student is non-Aboriginal to acknowledge that it is not only Aboriginal students who are in need of healing in their lives. His classroom teacher was quite shocked when I told him that he was going to perform on the snare drum at the Remembrance Day assembly.

was a direct human connection to the moment, to the beauty that was created in the gym at that microcosmic point in time.

I intuitively sense that when Aboriginal students hear the flute, they are automatically connected, through the soothing sound, to a positive part of their personal heritage and culture. They instantly become a part of the beauty. They become connected in an intimate, emotional, and intrinsic way to the peacefulness and joy that the sound of the flute elicits deep within their being. The gentle, soothing sound effortlessly penetrates the hardened, street-smart shells that many of the youth have created to protect themselves from emotional and/or physical harm. They become connected not only to the sound of the flute at that moment, they become connected in a heartfelt and meaningful way to the best that their cultures, ancestors, and histories have to offer. In that moment, they realize that they are a part of something greater than themselves. They realize they actually belong with and to the beauty they are not only hearing, but that they are feeling to the core of their very being. Connected through emotions, their spirit is moved.

***The Tipi Teachings***



*Figure 4.* Tipi Teachings, SESH, 2005

When I first walked into Soaring Eagle, I was greeted by a beautiful painting of the Tipi Teachings: nitohta, kēsyihta, nisitohta – listen, learn, understand. I was struck by the universality of that message and the human values listed on the painting: obedience, respect, humility, happiness, love, faith, kinship, cleanliness, thankfulness, sharing, strength, good child rearing, hope, and protection. I couldn't imagine how any of the world's cultures would not embrace and value every word on that painting. As I continued to gaze at the eye-catching portrait, I could not help but think how just reading and rereading the words carried me back to my hometown, to my family, to my upbringing. I realized then, more than ever, how fortunate I was to have grown up with my family, surrounded by the love of my brothers, sisters and parents. If I had a bad day or scraped my knee, I could run home to mom and get a warm hug and Band-Aid to make things better. What would life have been like without that support? I wonder again how I would have, or if I even could have, weathered the residential school storm and survived. Would my parents have survived? How did anyone manage to survive?

Perhaps part of the answer to survival can be found in the Tipi Teachings. A tipi is not made of one pole. A tipi cannot even be started with two poles. To start building a tipi, you need at least three poles. They stand connected together forming a tripod, not separated up and down, supporting each other as we do in life. By balancing together properly, "they are able to reinforce each other. There's a teaching in that. In order to make a family, you need three: the two parents and the child, to make that balance" (Lee, 2006, p.4).

Thinking about the Tipi Teachings, the values that were instilled in Cree children from birth until they were stolen away from their families, I imagine that during the

formative first five or six years of their lives, children internalized how the Tipi Teachings were lived by the people in their community. I began to think about how the teachings had become such a part of their being, that they could not be erased, they could only be silenced (Giroux, 1997; Greene, 1998 & 1995; Weis & Fine, 2005) as they were pushed down so deeply inside that they hid from the conscious part of their being. I began to wonder if what students were experiencing through engagement with the flute helped to awaken that which had been silenced, that which could not be erased, that which had “just been forgotten” (Kenneth Charlette, Recorded conversation, December 5, 2005, p. 17).

I was reminded of something that Kenneth Charlette, artistic director of the Saskatchewan Native Theatre Company, said to a couple of my students. These happened to be the same students my former principal, Chesmu Akecheta, mentioned in his conversation. I brought the students to play their Northern Spirit Flutes for an audition Kenneth was hosting. Kenneth stopped the students after they performed their first song and began to work with them. He asked them to close their eyes and to imagine they were going to play the flute for someone they really liked. He went on to say,  “Remember. Music is the first language of the spirit. Now try playing your song again” (p.13). The students played their song again and it flowed smoothly and freely with artistic expression that wasn’t present in their first performance. Through his gift of being able to inspire connection to one’s inner artistic side or spirit, Kenneth awoke something within the students that, until that moment, lay sleeping. This is what inspired me to have a conversation with Kenneth as a part of my graduate work. I intuitively sensed he had wisdom and an understanding of life that I yearned to learn from. I wasn’t disappointed.



I found how powerful the Creator and the Spirit really is. I found that there is no difference in our hearts, that the Spirit speaks one language. I found that one language that we all spoke and wrote. I found the incredible beauty that exists all around us and a part of me wants to stay there. You know, I don't want to go 20 years back. I like where I am right now, and the arts has helped me to do that. The arts is power beyond your imagination when you look into the truth. And the truth, when you can see the truth, you can see that it's a part of every human being and all you have to do is awaken it. And you can help awaken it. And that behind the arts just lies an incredible way of life that is a part of what the Creator intended for all of us. (Kenneth Charlette, Recorded conversation, December 5, 2005, p. 18)

I used to think it was too idealistic that the people who first came to settle the prairies could think in such away. I was wrong. Kenneth reminded me of a story I read while reviewing literature in the Saskatchewan Archives. I came across papers belonging to Campbell Innes, a schoolteacher who traveled to Red Pheasant reserve to teach the children there. Innes helped to build the school he taught in and remained on the reserve for six years until just after the Riel Rebellion. Campbell Innes not only taught on the reserve, he clearly understood that he had learned a great deal during his six years at Red Pheasant.

During those six years, that I resided among the Indians, I learned, and unlearned a great deal. Nearly all that I had thought I knew, I found incorrect: I had to begin again. I learned their language: I learned their character and customs, I learned their point of view. I saw how they were born, how they lived, and how they died.

In their natural condition, I found them honest, truthful, and good-natured under all kinds of adverse circumstances. Even today [1880s] in their degeneration, they will bear comparison in these respects, with their neighbors of various European nationalities. But the more they mix with white men, the worse they become (Innes Papers, p. 50).

Innes admits he had to “unlearn a great deal” during his time at Red Pheasant. I can relate, as I have had to unlearn a great deal of what I was misled to believe as a child, youth, and young man. When I reread Innes’ words, I had faith that our young people in the 21<sup>st</sup> century can unlearn the mistruths that have been carried forward for generations.

This belief was reinforced recently when I presented a full-day workshop on how to make and play the Northern Spirit Flute to sixty grade seven and eight students at Jack MacKenzie Elementary School, a brand new school located in an affluent area of Regina. There was not even one Aboriginal student present for the session in the sparkling new school, yet the students responded with excitement, enthusiasm, and an intense attention to every step of learning how to make and play their Northern Spirit Flutes.

The day started with a prayer, blessing, and smudging by Elder, Isadore Pelletier. I followed the introductory ceremony by playing the *Zuni Sunrise* song on a Northern Spirit Flute. Afterwards, I dramatically told one of the brief origin stories of the Native American Flute, then I explained how I was honored to bring the gift of the flute to the students. I finished the introduction by performing a Micmac gift-giving song taught to me by Joseph Naytowhow. Although there were no Aboriginal students, they were all fully engaged and attentive for the entire day. At the end of the day’s learning, I spoke about how having their children stolen away from their parents impacted First Nations

people during the residential school era. I concluded the day's learning by singing Joseph Naytowhow and Cheryl L'Hirondelle's song *One People* (1998 & 2000).

I couldn't help but think that, like Innes, the students were having the opportunity to "unlearn a great deal" from being engaged in making and playing an instrument that was created by First Nations people of North America. At the end of the experience, I felt very hopeful that by opening their hearts and connecting them to a positive part of First Nations culture, the cycle of perpetuating mistruths and negative stereotypes would be interrupted. I was hopeful that through the flute these students could help be a part of the healing process that needs to come about to bring change for future generations. I was hopeful that the students came away from the experience feeling "we are all one people" (Naytowhow, 1992).

### ***We Are All One People***

As I thought about this first time experience of teaching a group of non-Aboriginal students, I realized how very connected I feel to the First Nations community in Saskatchewan. This is my home too. I am connected to the land as they have been since time immemorial. I have known no other home, as they have known no other home. I was born here. I will die here. Perhaps it is because of this, that like Hanohano, I also feel the need to "give back to the community." Perhaps it is because of this, I adhere to the teachings I have received from my parents and the Elders that we are all one people. Joseph Naytowhow and Cheryl L'Hirondelle embodied this so beautifully in their song entitled "*One People*" (Naytowhow & L'Hirondelle, 2000). I remember how deeply I was moved the first time I heard *One People*.



## One People

©1992 Joseph Naytowhow & Cheryl L'Hirondelle

We are all one people. We all come from one creation,  
Way on high.

We are all one nation, under one great sky,  
You and I.

We are all one people, we are all one color,  
In His eye.

Niwakomakan, kawitisanitoyak,  
Ohci ispihik.

Pēyak kotawan, kici kēsiko,  
Kiyano.

Kakio pēyakwan, kisinakosino,  
Ota askiy.

We are all one people. We all come from one creation,  
Way on high.

We are all one nation, under one great sky,  
You and I.

We are all one people, we are all one color  
In Her eye.

We are all one people,  
We are all one nation,  
We are all one color, if we try.

I believe this to the core of my being. I feel connected to the Aboriginal children I teach and their families. I feel we are joined through our shared life's journey. I hope that, in some small way, the students at Jack MacKenzie Elementary school felt this

kinship through their experience making Northern Spirit Flutes and will continue to feel it as their teachers follow up with the Songs of the Spirit curriculum.

### ***Returning to the Tipi Teachings***

While I read about the Tipi Teachings, I asked myself the question, “Are the values that are taught through the Tipi Teachings different from the values I was taught growing up in my family, in my community, in my culture? Would the Tipi Teachings be a valuable addition to the Songs of the Spirit curriculum?” The Cree Elders teach that

[v]alues help guide behaviour through the process of growing up, changing and handling responsibilities. Personal values are what determine a person’s decisions and actions. Social values are set by cultural beliefs as to what is important for a community. There are fifteen traditional Cree cultural values that serve as a guide for happy and healthy living. Each value is *honored* in the construction of a teepee which requires 15 poles - with each pole symbolizing one value:

1. Obedience – accepting guidance and wisdom from others
2. Respect – for self and others
3. Humility – knowing that we are not above or below others in the circle of life
4. Happiness – showing enthusiasm to encourage others
5. Love – love of self and love of others, not things
6. Faith – belief in the spirit world
7. Kinship – relationships and bonds with parents, siblings, extended relatives, knowing one’s home community
8. Cleanliness – spiritual cleanliness

9. Thankfulness – gratitude for life and for family
10. Sharing – sharing knowledge, stories, traditions, for future generations
11. Strength – spiritual strength to do things that are difficult
12. Good Child Rearing – guidance and protection of the sacred gift of children
13. Hope – hope that the women who are the life givers and the nurturers will carry on the teachings to bring healthy spirited people into the world
14. Ultimate Protection – protection of the minds, spirit, emotions and health of the youth
15. Control flaps from winds – balance in life’s journey

These are the sacred values that sustain the Cree spiritually, physically, emotionally and mentally. The first three are considered the foundation of the teepee because a teepee will not stand upright with only two poles, a minimum of three are needed - just as you need a child and two parents to make a family. A ceremony is followed when erecting a teepee, with tobacco given to Mother Earth by a woman in thanks for the use of all the materials to make the teepee, and the doorway facing east. The teepee is symbolic of the sacredness of womanhood as it stands with dignity; it provides warmth, comfort and shelter, and love and care to the family. With the control flaps up, the teepee resembles an old woman standing with her arms extended out in thanks. Women are named after the fire that is built in the centre of the tipi (Lee, 2006, pp. 2-3).

“These are the sacred values that sustain the Cree spiritually, physically, emotionally and mentally.” As I reread, reread again, and reflected on these words, I realized more fully what should have been obvious from the beginning – how the Medicine Wheel and Tipi Teachings are interconnected and in relationship. It made me mindful of how the interconnected aspects of the Songs of the Spirit curriculum, that include Elder lessons on respect, honesty, and patience, might be improved and strengthened with the addition of the Tipi Teachings. I rethought what might be the most important teachings to include in the curriculum beyond the making and playing of the flute.

I realized the first three poles of obedience, respect, and humility were values that were instilled in me as a child. The next teachings on happiness, love, faith, kinship, cleanliness, thankfulness, sharing, strength, good child rearing, hope, and protection all resonated with what I recall being taught by my parents, my teachers, and other community members. The tipi concludes with the control flaps. They are used to manage the airflow and release smoke and insects from the fire. Positioned properly, “all smoke and insects flow out through the opening at the top of the teepee. So these flaps represent balance in life’s journey” (Lee, 2006, p.3). Once again, this teaching on “balance in life’s journey” resonated with what my mother, my first teacher, sought to teach me. This is a lesson for which I have finally come to an age I am ready to receive it.

I returned to the question, "How do the values that are taught through the Tipi Teachings speak to my family, my community, my culture?" I saw myself, my family, my community, and humanity in the teachings in so many ways. I felt connected and in relationship with First Nations teachings and culture. I understood much more

clearly the words I have heard spoken so often at the end of a prayer or speech by First Nations people - "all my relations." I believe including these teachings within the curriculum will enable Aboriginal students to connect more fully with their culture. I believe including these teachings in the curriculum will help non-Aboriginal students feel more connected and in relationship with First Nations teachings and cultures. I believe including these teachings in the curriculum will help all students to realize how, in Joseph Naytowhow's words, we are all one people.

## CHAPTER 7

### Attending to Students' Spiritual Needs



*“When you hear the music it does sound so eloquent and so spiritual. It is almost like the flute is weeping.” (Onawa Gaho, March 17, 2006, pp. 4-5)*

#### ***Spirit – Inward Aspect of Self and Outward Aspect of the Great Spirit***

The word “spirit” came up repeatedly in research conversations and students’ journal writing. Spirit, one of the *four aspects of self*, was mentioned so often and in such a significant way that it became an important part of the study. It made me reflect on the numerous occasions throughout my teaching career when I have intuitively felt that something unseen was taking place when students participated in the music making process. In many ways, what I felt paralleled the various positive emotions that I have when I’m with my own children. Yet, in some way, this unseen, unquantifiable phenomenon was different than emotion and it seemed to enable students to connect inwardly to a part of themselves, while at the same time outwardly to the rest of the class in an uplifting way. The concept of the “spirit” within each of us and the “great spirit” or “Creator,” that which connects us all together, seemed to capture the essence of the phenomena as I understood it.

Having been raised as a Catholic, I became accustomed to hearing the word spirit from a very young age. It was most often spoken in reference to the Holy Spirit, one of the Holy Trinity in the Catholic faith, along with the Father (God) and the Son (Jesus). As is the Catholic custom when making the sign of the cross, I would say, “In the name of the Father, the Son, the Holy Spirit, Amen.” My personal understanding of spirit has evolved over the years. When I think of my spirit, I believe it to be the very essence of who I am, the best of my true self. That is to say, my spirit is more than what is seen in

the physical world. It's the part of me that is unseen, yet is the most integral part of my being that continues on after my physical self is no more.

In terms of the English language, spirit is derived from the Latin word *spiritus*, originally meaning breath (Encyclopedia Britannica Online, 2007). I am intrigued at how the research suggests that the breath students put into their flutes helps them, on a very intrinsic and personal level, to move beyond their physical and mental selves to connect with their inner spiritual self. Elder Onida Shimasani told me during one of our conversations that she came in to make a flute with the students so that she could see the “spirit grow,” how students would react to the experience of making their own flutes. Onida observed the students not only making the flute, but also how students played their flutes, and how they carried their flutes around the school.

### ***Carrying Their Spirit, Their Northern Spirit Flute***

What I notice with the students is sort of that buddy system with their flute. It's sort of like, somebody that you can carry with you and be with you. Because I notice they carry their flutes around a lot. It's with them all the time. . . And even sitting in the stairway towards the gym there and just playing it, softly by themselves. . . And to me that sort of that self- counseling. It is the same that I do with my sewing. . . It's just something that I do. Then my hands are comfortable, I can think. And when I see them with their flute I say wow, now they found something. . . Something of comfort that's theirs. They made it. It's theirs. What they put into it is that spiritual connection they have. It is very much a spiritual connection. That's what I see. (Onida Shimasani, Recorded conversation, March 14, p.3).

We put spirit into everything we do. . . and they did put good spirit into their flutes because it was wonderful how it came out, the sound and the effort and the patience. Because when you do something like that you need to put your whole self, your patience into it. Yeah. And that's your, sort of your journey. . . . they whole-heartedly sat there and concentrated. Because I was in there when they were making their flutes. . . They wanted to perfect everything they did. So their spirit went in there, part of them. Yeah. And then carrying their flutes around, because I watch them carry their flutes around. They are very conscientious. That is their spirit they are carrying. (Onida Shimasani, Recorded conversation, March 14, p.5-6).

Doige (2003) agrees with Onida stating “spirituality is the very element that Aboriginal educators say enables students to become critical participants in the genuine edges and boundaries of a complex history because they know and understand themselves and their fellow students” (p. 144). Doige goes on to say that “education must be holistic and transformative in order to create and promote authentic dialogue” (p. 144).

### ***Beyond the Mental and Physical – Connecting With Spirit***

From teacher Hania Maska’s vantage point, the Northern Spirit Flute makes a spiritual connection with students that reaches beyond the mental and the physical aspect of their being.

I’m talking about the connection that one has with the wind, with the sun, the rain, the moon the stars, the earth. That intuitive connection with life forms and being able to reach beyond the five sensory prison, you know. . . . Because status quo education does not work, but the flute, music, that sort of spiritual connection, I think has a viability, you know. And if you are thinking Indian that is so true

because you have to operate more from other areas, not just your physical and your mental. You have to use your emotions and your spirit. You know and this is what the old chiefs used to say. You know, they still say that today, these knowledge keepers that it is through prayer, it is through meditation and quietness, stillness of the mind that you connect with greater spirituality. (Hania Maska, Recorded conversation, March 17, p. 10)

My first conversation with Elder Alo Apenimon supported Hania Maska's view. Alo said that when you listen to the flute "a message is sent to the universe and all of creation" and that one of the Elders told him that you can learn when you "listen to the wind, and the trees, and the leaves" (February 17, p. 1).

Onawa Gaho, the cultural arts teacher, described how "when you hear the music it does sound so eloquent and so spiritual. It is almost like the flute is weeping, for [her] anyway. It's just so touching so [she] can see it being such a spiritual experience or feeling the spiritual experience" (Recorded conversation, March 17, 2006, pp. 4-5). Students echoed Onawa's connection of the flute to spirit. One wrote in his journal, "I think a flute is a very spiritual instrument of life. I would be spiritually stronger if I learned how to play a flute." From having observed this quiet, almost withdrawn, student, I couldn't help but think that he felt he would gain some inner strength that would help him connect outwardly with the "Great Spirit" from mastering how to play the flute. In another example, a student wrote, "I feel that making my own flute is a wonderful spiritual experience. It gives me a chance to learn a little more about my Native culture." For many students, there was an inseparable connection between culture and spirit. I started wondering whether it was the listening to the gentle sound of the flute, the

learning how to play the flute, the making of the flute, the learning about Native culture through the history of the flute, or was it perhaps the synergistic combination of all of the above in the Songs of the Spirit curriculum that brings about the experience of associating the flute with spirit, enabling students to connect with their own spirit.

The 2006 Cambridge dictionary defines spirit “as the characteristics of a person that are considered as being separate from the body, and which many religions believe continue to exist after the body dies.” The First Nations teachings that I have received tell of how “life begins in the spirit and returns to the spirit world following death” of our human body (Lee, 2006, p. 2). From my lived experience and research, it is unmistakably clear that for Aboriginal people life consists of more than merely the physical world that we live in, that which we can see with our eyes and feel with our hands.

Onida Shimasani told me how music was always an important part of her family growing up, calling it “family self-spiritual entertainment” (Onida Shimasani, Recorded conversation, March, 14, p. 14).

You stoke up the stove, you cut wood all day and you sit and you listen to music. He used to sing. That's how I remember, never letting that spirit go astray or hide. I call it hiding... You know, when they're not comfortable our spirits hide. And you can tell. Our spirits will never leave us but we need to comfort them. We need to inspire them. We can see people, how happy they look when they hear music. It is a gift for the people and all schools should have that (p. 14-15).

I was moved and encouraged by Onida’s words. She thought of music as a “gift” that “inspires,” something that comforts the spirit, something all schools should have. Onida’s thoughts on how the spirit hides brought me back to a conversation with Anna

Hantaywee. Anna spoke of how she believes one's inner spirit gets lonely and needs to be fed.

A lot of times I think it has to do with our spirit, our spirit inside. It needs, it needs to talk to us eh? And the only time that we can hear it is in the stillness, in the quietness. That's why I always think that there are so many lonely people in this world. If our spirit, if we're lonely inside, our spirit is lonely for something. It's not, a lot of times it's not us, it's, we need to feed it eh? And that's were a lot of times loneliness comes from, it's our spirit longing for the spiritual. The spiritual praying or the spiritual thoughts that we need to feed it. (Recorded conversation, March 7, 2006, p. 15)

I began to wonder if the sound of the flute calls the spirit out of "hiding" to be comforted, to be fed, to be healed, to be inspired, and to be reconnected in relationship with others? Does sound of the flute beckon to the spirit in the same gentle, non-threatening way that a young babe's innocent smile and sparkling eyes of wonder beckon and connect to the heart of even hardened youth or adults? Does the sound of the flute soothingly help the spirit remind the mind, the mental part of one's being, of its own innate humanity as well as its connection with the rest of humanity?

Anna believed that Lenmana was learning how to connect with her own spirituality through playing the flute, as well as with the Creator.

I feel really good about it. I am very supportive of her. I think she is learning something really valuable for herself and how to connect with her spirituality while she's playing that it's some form of meditation and serenity like, within herself. And plus she will also help other people. . . . Especially when she gets to

creating her own music and you know, she tells the story of what is behind it and what she created ... It gives you a clear mind, if you know how to be alone and be able to pray and meditate. So I always think that's what the flute does. Is it teaches people how to meditate, like to connect with the creator. (Anna Hantaywee, recorded conversation, February 27, p. 13 -24)

From Anna's vantage point, she saw both an inward and an outward connection to spirituality that is fostered through the playing the flute. For her the flute enables her daughter to learn "to be alone," "to connect with her spirituality," "to be able to pray," find serenity "within herself" and meditate," and "to connect with the Creator." Much like Onida Shimasani's parents, she doesn't want to let her daughter's spirit hide. She wants it to be fed, nurtured, and to grow to its full potential.

### *Spiritual Cleanliness*

The eighth Tipi Teaching on cleanliness speaks of not just the physical cleanliness of a person, it more importantly speaks of the spiritual cleanliness. Lenmana Alsoomse was glad that she made her

first flute, instead of just buying it. . . Because I know where it came from, I know everything about it. And not knowing, like if I had to buy it from a store or something, you don't know whose hands have been on it and what they did in their life. So I know my flute is clean and everything. (Recorded conversation, February 6, pp.8-9).

I could tell that she was taught her culture well by her mother Anna Hantaywee. Lenmana's words reminded me of a conversation with Onawa Gaho. Onawa spoke of how she could feel the strong spiritual presence that emanated from kohkoms, grandmothers, she had worked with. She said you could tell that they were very

spiritually clean because of this. At another time Onawa spoke of how “being mindful and having good thoughts” when we did something was very important “because our minds are powerful elements in this physical world. Our thoughts create our universe. So when we are creating the flute and putting our spirit into it, well our thoughts are a part of our spirit” (Onawa Gaho, Recorded conversation, March 17, pp. 16-18). This helped me to further my understanding of what Lenmana meant when she said “my flute is clean,” why First Nations people smudge to cleanse themselves before they pray, and why my flute was smudged before I performed for “large circle.” I have repeated this practice of smudging prior to beginning writing many times over the course of working on my thesis. I found that I longed for the spiritual component of smudging and prayer that I had become accustomed to at Soaring Eagle School of Excellence.

### *Nurturing Spirit in Public School*

As I thought about how I missed the spiritual component at Soaring Eagle, I was brought back to my present teaching assignment. I found myself asking whether spirit could be nurtured in public school, something that is a part of all the world’s cultures, or should spirit be avoided because we don’t want to risk offending someone? Should we exclude all discussion about spirit or the opportunity to experience connecting with one’s spirit in education? If we choose to ignore spirit, what does it cost us at the human, the family, the community, the cultural, social, or inevitably the financial level? Could the Songs of the Spirit curriculum be a gentle and effective way of addressing the void that seems to be so present in many of our young Aboriginal students lives? I wondered if the Songs of the Spirit curriculum provides the opportunity to bring about some balance and healing in students lives.

Onida Shimasani shared her personal experience of learning to find balance in life, as she has found that with age comes wisdom. You learn that there are “other things in life.”

Onida Shimasani: And usually people who mentally have been like this all their life when you get older something tells you, hey you're missing something.

Something happens in your life that makes you slow down, to not be so physical and not to be so mental. Something happens that says you have to think about spiritual too. You're leaving this out and you are leaving that out.

Richard: You have to strike that balance.

Onida Shimasani: And that happens. No matter how rich we get in our journeys of knowledge we still need to balance. We still need to balance. Sometimes you are so off focus. Even I catch myself doing that. I used to love to work, very physical, very, very physical. But what I did was always run home and my mother always made sure I sat down and remembered the spiritual part of me, you know. If she hadn't have been there I'd have been. It's ok to be active, there's nothing wrong to be very active and a good worker and all that but there's other things in life too.

There's other things in life. (Recorded conversation, February 27, 2006, p. 41)

“There’s other things in life” – so simply stated and so profoundly true. Onida’s mother had the wisdom to sit her down to remember the spiritual part of her being, Yet it seems that in education there is a constant preoccupation with the mental and physical parts of learning – the math scores, the reading scores, the football scores, and the basketball scores. What about the “other things in life?” Why do we choose to prioritize what is worth learning in such a way that “little room is left for living, for the sake of

living a full, rich and free life” (Dewey, 1938, p. 141-142). Why isn’t it just as important for students to have “rich” experiences in their education that feed and “free” their spirit, the inner part of themselves that will inevitably “hide” if their education ignores it? Isn’t it like putting the cart before the horse? Wouldn’t providing the experiences that make life “full, rich and free” lead to success in the other parts of education that tend to be more mundane?

Already in 1938, John Dewey recognized that it was “daily [becoming] more evident that unless some integration [could] be attained, the always increasing isolations and oppositions consequent upon the growth of specialization in all fields [would] in the end disrupt our civilization” (p. 148). Almost seventy years ago, Dewey recognized what First Nations people already knew – that the disconnecting and compartmentalization of education was contrary to how we experience our lived lives.

### ***One of Life’s Cruel Ironies – Alcoholic Spirits***

I find it cruelly ironic how the introduction to alcoholic “spirits” served to do so much damage to the spirit of Aboriginal people. Alcohol serves to compound and multiply the negative impact of the residential school legacy. I have taught so many children who’s families have suffered and still suffer the effects of addictions to alcohol, drugs, or both. The impact for some children is instantly obvious – abuse, neglect, self-rearing children, lack of attendance at school, and on and on. For other kids, it may be something that hides beneath the surface. Inevitably, in all too many cases the negative effect of addictions becomes apparent on cheque day. I move back in time to my first close up experience with families who were struggling with their addiction to alcohol, an experience I will never be able to forget.

## **The Body**

Our initial attempts to get the kids in the summer program lice free before the overnight trip to the healing waters of Manitou beach failed. We came up with a backup plan to gather up all of the kids' clothes the night before we left and wash them. The next morning, we would give the kids a lice treatment then have them put on freshly laundered clothes. This would allow us to go to the bed and breakfast lice free. Earlier in the week, we had sent home a list of what the kids would need for the trip. I had the task of gathering up any clothes and items the kids had not already brought for the trip, after the program had ended for the day. As I started to make my rounds, I quickly learned that it was "cheque day." I had been through cheque days before and I knew they could be disruptive to the regular school routine, but I had never experienced first hand what takes place.

On my first drive around to gather up the missing items for the trip, most of the parents and caregivers were not home. On my second drive around, I found some parents just returning from the liquor store, taking bottles out of brown paper bags. I reminded them about the trip the next day and the items still missing for the list we had sent home. When I returned later, the atmosphere in the places that had returned from the liquor store was getting more jovial and the sound of the conversations were getting louder. I reminded one caregiver that I still needed a couple of items for the trip the next day and I would return in about an hour. On the third trip around, a couple of homes were in full party mode and I was no longer able to communicate effectively with one of the caregivers. I did manage to locate her child and make alternate arrangements for her to stay with another family over night, as she was usually left alone when her grandmother

got drunk. Throughout all these drives around, I had still not located Akando,<sup>32</sup> one of the boys in my group, and it was getting dark out. I decided to locate Pallaton,<sup>33</sup> one of the other boys in my group and see if he might know where Akando was. Pallaton said he didn't know but he would be willing to come with me to look for Akando.

We set out like two detectives, first heading to Bacik's corner store. As I bought us each a bag of chips and a slush, I asked the owner if he had seen Akando. The answer was no. We went on our way driving up and down back alleys, and to places Pallaton thought Akando might be. I was determined to find him because we were only three days away from finishing the program. I did not want Akando to miss the opportunity to go on this trip because of the chaos of cheque day. About twenty minutes later we spotted Akando's sister and asked her for help. She said she wasn't sure where Akando was but she would come along and help out. We drove back to the apartment and there was still nobody home. She suggested we go to one of her aunties' and check for him there. We drove over. Akando wasn't there. She suggested we go check at another aunties' and there he was. I explained to his aunt that I needed to gather up his clothes so that he would be ready for the special trip to Manitou Beach, the next morning. She consented that Akando come with me so we could return to his apartment and gather up the missing items.

When we got there, I walked up to the front door expecting that Akando would have a key. He pressed the buzzer to the apartment and nobody answered. I was about at

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<sup>32</sup> Akando is a Native American name that means "ambush." The reason for the use of this pseudonym will become clearer as the story unfolds.

<sup>33</sup> Pallaton is a Native American name that means "fighter." This pseudonym is being used for this tough little boy because he got into a fight within the first five minutes of arriving to the first day of the summer program.

my wits end and heading back into the van when Akando told me, “Don’t worry Mr. Dubé. I know how to break in.” Within seconds, there I was looking over my shoulder as I moved a wooden pallet against the wall, just below the window to their apartment. With an agility that only comes from experience, Akando quickly climbed up the pallet, jimmied the window and entered the apartment. As I walked around to the entrance of the apartment building and consciously realized what I had just done, I felt that somehow I had now been fully initiated into but one of the ways of surviving life in the inner city. Akando opened the door and let his sister and me into the building. As we entered the apartment, I looked down the dimly lit hallway for a light switch. Of course when I found it and turned it on, nothing happened. After a couple of minutes of trying different light switches, I found one that finally worked in the kitchen. As I sat down and took out my list of what was needed for the trip, Akando shouted down the hallway from his room that the light was burned out in there too. I thought to myself, “You’ve got to be kidding. How could things possibly get any worse?” I looked up and noticed that the fixture in the kitchen actually had two bulbs in it that worked. Eureka! I took one out, grabbed a chair, and made my way down to Akando’s bedroom. I screwed the bulb into the empty socket, then flicked on the switch lighting up the room. The light revealed a smashed up box spring but no mattress, and over there hanging in the closet, a new batch of clothes. I thought to myself, “Thank God! His mom went and did some shopping before she went out drinking.” I went back down the hallway, chair in hand, to the kitchen to check the list of what Akando needed for the trip, thinking to myself that things could not possibly get any worse.

I had barely sat down when Akando's sister shouted down the hallway to me, "Mr. Dubé! Come quick! I think there's a body in here!"

I froze, a million thoughts ran through my brain – Please God! Not a body! Anything, but not a body! Surely, this can't be possible. There's no phone to call the police. Maybe this is why no one is home. What if someone broke into the apartment before us and was hiding out. I knew I would have to get the kids out of there quickly.

"Come here Mr. Dubé!" she said as her brother made his way to her side.

I said, as I felt like I was moving in slow motion getting out of my chair, "You know, I think we have enough stuff for Akando to make the trip. It's probably best if we just leave."

I hadn't even finished my sentence when she repeated, "No! Look there's a body!"

I felt like I had sludge coursing through my veins as I moved toward the room, halfway between the kitchen and Akando's room. I thought to myself, "Why did she have to look in that room anyway?" As I approached the doorway to the room and reached out to take her arm and lead her away, she moved into the room. What on earth was she thinking? As I froze in the doorway, she started removing clothes from this pile on the floor. I saw a foot, then a leg, then a knee, then a thigh. With each piece of clothing she peeled off the pile, I remember thinking, no blood, no blood, no blood. Then I saw the stomach, the chest. No blood, no blood. As she reached for the last item of clothing covering the face, I couldn't move. I stood frozen in my tracks. It was surreal. It seemed slower than slow motion, as she peeled back the last piece of clothing, slowly, away from

the head. WHAM! These eyes opened and stared back at me. My body jumped back in shock, hitting the wall behind me.

“Oh. It’s just Henry, mom’s friend,” she said calmly.

Henry reached for a piece of clothing, covered his face and went back to sleep.

Still in shock, I made my way back to the kitchen table to sit down. I said, “You just scared the living crap out of me.” I took a deep breath and we proceeded to gather the rest of the items we needed for the trip.

Just as Akando and his sister made their way to the kitchen the door burst open and Akando’s mother stumbled in, followed by a police officer wearing a bullet proof vest. His mother’s boyfriend followed, helping her stumble to the couch in the living room area connected to the kitchen. The boyfriend thanked the officer for his help getting Akando’s mother out of the party they were at and the officer left. I stepped into the hallway with mom’s boyfriend. I explained that I had everything that Akando needed for the trip the next morning and I wanted to make sure that he would be well rested for the trip to the healing waters of Manitou Beach. He suggested that it might be better if Akando stayed at his auntie’s when mom’s like this. I agreed, taking the kids back to the auntie’s apartment where we had found Akando. I returned home, still somewhat in shock, to wash and organize the kids’ clothes in preparation for the trip the next morning to the healing waters of Manitou Beach.

### *Spiritual Disease*

Addictions is often referred to as a spiritual disease where one is considered to be spiritually bankrupt. In essence this means the person feels completely alone, isolated from humanity, separated from her/himself. There is no connection to their soul, their innermost being whose very birthright dictates that they have

every right to *be* who they are in this world, to *accept* who they are, and to *know* they are a sacred part of the world. In their desolation, they have no sense of connection to a sacred Higher Power, by whatever name it may be known, and know knowledge of the spiritual means by which to find it (Evans, 2002, p. 83).

So many children live in families that struggle with addictions. It can be heart-wrenching to see first hand the impact that this difficult and often life-long battle has on children and their parents. It is very hard to forget the feeling one gets from looking into such empty eyes. I can remember asking, “How can such a beautiful human being, one of the Creator’s most amazing creations, become so “spiritually bankrupt” and disconnected from her soul?” What kind of harm needs to take place? What kind of pain is she trying to forget? Will she ever forget it? How and why can the pull of the addiction be so much stronger than the needs of her children, her reason for being? More importantly, how could I help such a lost soul to get in touch, to reconnect, with her inner spirit so that she “*knew she was* a sacred part of the world?” Even though I knew the answers to the questions, I could not stop my mind from asking them as I stared into Kachina’s empty eyes, continuing our interconnected journey through life.

In the dead of the Saskatchewan winter, I carried the three year-old child back into the house of adults, all were oblivious to the fact that the tiny baby was starting to veer off down the back alley a mere ten yards away from an extremely busy road that turns into the Idylwyld freeway. In the meantime, Kachina’s six and eight year old had climbed up onto a car that was trapped in a three-foot snow bank. They were jumping up and down on the roof of it. The reason for the home visit: the seven year-old disclosed that she had found three of her mom’s needles in the bathroom. The backdrop to the

scene: it's a week and a half before Christmas. The main problem: mom is off the wagon and has spent all of the Christmas money on a three-day party. The potential problem: mom is threatening to go back and work the streets to make money for Christmas presents for the kids. I know how helpless I felt at that moment – I can't imagine how hopeless she felt as the mom?

Yet, I've been told that this type of family dysfunction is more common than I might like to imagine. I was told by the school counselor that in December of 2005 there were around 400 children in foster care, while in December of 2006 there were over 800. So what can be done to try and bring some healing change into the lives of families who are struggling with addictions?

A counselor at an addictions recovery center stated, "I am convinced that out of all the stuff that we do, the most successful part that we do is when people find their spiritual life. That's the success that I see" (168MBp12 in Evans, 2002, p. 114).

Through the research, I came to believe the Songs of the Spirit curriculum could play a part in trying to help people reconnect with their spirit and help them to "find their spiritual life." I came to believe this curriculum could be a way of empowering Aboriginal people, both children and parents who are struggling with addictions, to connect with their inner spirit and the Creator to facilitate healing. I saw no reason to continue repeating a history where "[a]lcohol and other drugs [are] welcomed as a beautiful escape from hell (Kaye, 1990:133-4 in Perley, p. 22), especially when "the most distinguishing feature of Native culture and language is its spirituality" and "this is the one aspect of Native culture that is often missing, neglected, or dismissed in western

educational models” (Hanohano, 1999, p. 211; Charlette, recorded conversation, 2005; Doige, 2003; Fine, 2005; Freire, 1989; Kind et al, 2005; Kozol, 2005; Sewall, 1996). The Songs of the Spirit curriculum attends to this distinguishing feature and brings Aboriginal students in touch with their inner spirit while enabling them to also connect with the outer spirit, that which connects us all.

## CHAPTER 8

### Attending to Students' Emotional Needs

*“because of these feelings inside. My feelings.”*

*(Aleshanee Ominotago, March 8, pp. 5-6)*



*When we look at our emotions and our feelings, there's no hiding them. Every human being's the same in that capacity. Human beings feel. Human beings understand emotion. Emotions are what take us through life. All our choices in life are made behind our emotions.*

*(Kennetch Charlette, December 5, p. 33)*

When I first heard the Native American Flute, it touched me on a very emotional level. I believe this is why it has become such a significant part of my journey as a teacher, an emotional voyage to say the least. First and foremost, I teach with my heart. I live to feel. I express all human emotions with my students. I am not afraid to show my feelings whether they be of anger or sadness, nor my feelings of happiness and joy. I believe students need to know that I am a real person, just like them. I incorporate humor and a sense of playfulness within my teaching practice. It is my perception that when students realize you have a sense of humor and a playful nature, they gain an increased sense of feeling safe and being cared for within the music class. I sense that students intuitively pick up on whether educators care in our hearts about who they are, their learning, and their well-being. Every nuance in our voice, in our body language, and in our eyes unconsciously projects whether or not we care about our students.

I try to make sure that I do not use humor in a hurtful way with students by putting a student down. I take time to laugh at my own mistakes and to give students a

chance to laugh at my mistakes. I believe this modeling helps them learn to laugh at and to accept their own mistakes, as well as to learn from them. I never pretend I have all of the answers or that I am always right. If I do something wrong to a student, I apologize directly to the student, in front of the class if I believe it is appropriate and necessary. I model taking responsibility for my actions and in turn expect students to do the same.

I make it my practice to try and focus on students' positive strengths and catch them doing something good. I take special pleasure in catching the students who appear to receive little in the way of positive praise doing something good and making a big deal out of it. When I reflect on what I do best as an educator, I think it is helping students to connect with the emotional and spiritual part of their being. In perhaps even fewer words, I enable them to connect to their humanity, something in which Kenneth Charlette believes the arts plays an essential role. He expresses it as "trying to teach our children the values of what it is to be human" (December 5, 2006, p. 21).

### ***To Be Human***

So what is it to be human? What does it mean? Does it have to do with sharing in kindness, respect, happiness, hope, love, and thankfulness – in one word – emotions?

Kenneth's lived experienced has led him to believe that



when you work with children, and you see their incredible faces and how happy they are in expressing themselves, in voicing themselves, in learning to sing, in learning to play instruments, they are just filled with this incredible joy. You cannot help as a teacher to feel that joy to move with them. They give you energy. They give you strength. And to know that you're helping them to find themselves, finding the art within them. And to share that with your family, your community,

gives you an incredible feeling of hope yet, that there is hope for this world after all. (Kennetch Charlette, Recorded conversation, December 5, 2006 pp. 23-24)

### ***Feeling Joy***

Like Kennetch, I fully understand how working with ours and others feelings, responding by giving and receiving joy and happiness, is a reciprocal human process that leads to the feeling that “there is hope for this world after all.” Countless times, I have experienced the unquantifiable feeling of joy from creating beauty with my students. Eisner (2002) says “*joy* is not a term that is used much in the context of education but if the arts are about anything, they are about how they make you feel in their presence. The arts, when experienced in the fullness of our emotional life, are about becoming alive” (p. 85). Like Hania Maska, I feel this intuitively, inwardly. I see it repeatedly, on the outside, in the sparkling eyes of my students and on the faces of their parents’ when the students perform on their Northern Spirit Flutes. I’ve seen quiet, timid students like Shysie begin to smile and hold their head higher than before.

### ***The Transformative Feeling of Hope***

James (2002) states “the arts have informed the way that [she] incorporate[s] emotions, imagination, aesthetic experiences, and meaning [into] [her] teaching (p. 242). Her experience teaching “has increased [her] love of the arts and of their power to help us question, illuminate, and transform our world” (p. 242). I believe students quietly and gently go through this type of transformative experience when they play their Northern Spirit Flutes for themselves or for friends, and perhaps more intensely when they perform for family and larger audiences. Gere, Hoshmand, and Reinkraut (2002) believe that to honor First Nations ways of learning we need “to preserve the sacred nature of transformative encounters” (p. 175). Kennetch also believes there are transformative

possibilities through the arts. He thinks that by participating in the creation of the art or being a part of the audience this



maybe will incite some kind of hope within them too. In those two hours that we've taken them to another place, another time. That they will try to make change within themselves and within the world around them. Idealistic? Maybe. But it's still a part of who we are as human beings. This is where worlds were changed is through idealists. (Kenneth Charlette, Recorded conversation, December 5, 2006, pp. 23-24)

I know without that sense of hope, I would find it extremely difficult to get up and go to work each day. I know it is what keeps the idealist part of my humanity alive and awake to the hope that we can make the world a better place for our children and our children's children.

The challenge for me, and I'm guessing for other educators, has always been finding something that cannot only hook students' interest in the short term, but maintain that interest over the long haul. Like Sakima Qaletaq I do believe there is something going on when students hear the Native American Flute that deserves some serious attention. Sakima recognizes

there's a lot of chaos in their lives in what's going on. And so, the flute when its being played you know, or the kids are even able to play it 'cause they're learning, its kind of like a foreign entity that just comes in and brings them down and calms them. It's just a peacefulness. (Recorded conversation, February 21, p. 11)

As I came to know Sakima, I appreciated how he could sit back and observe what was taking place at Soaring Eagle. I know from how he spoke in our conversation that he

scanned all of the students, staff, and Elders for their reaction both when I performed and students performed on Northern Spirit Flutes at large circle. Sakima said, “The students who observed it were very interested. I mean it was quiet and they were watching and they were quiet and listening” (Recorded conversation, March 15, 2006, p. 14). He said he “saw the light in Mary and Simon being able to see” the students performing (p.14). He recognized the “gentle power,” like that of an Elder, that the flute seemed to cast over the students interest. Sakima also differentiated between how the flute connected with students in comparison to the guitar or the drum.

And it's affecting the youth. I really think that that music can be played with the kids brings a calmness to the anger that some of them have, to a peacefulness. I really, maybe I am speaking for myself. Not that I'm an angry guy but it's just a real peacefulness. But when I watch kids, you know they just kind of melt almost. It's, you know that's what music is. But it's such a peaceful music, not like strumming a guitar, it's not like the drum, you know. There's slow dancing and then there's hip hop. I mean that's just the reality of it. That's why I don't want it to die. I want it to be alive and well here and thriving. (Recorded conversation, March 15, p. 26)

Even though Sakima is not musically inclined himself, he recognizes that something very special is taking place when students are exposed to the flute. He wants to see the peacefulness continue. He wants students to feel the calmness, a stark contrast to the chaos he says many have in their lives.

### ***Good Medicine***

I believe for students suffocated in poverty, addictions, and violence, the Northern Spirit Flute enables them to breathe in the beauty life has to offer. Like Sakima, I've seen

students entranced, almost hypnotized when they hear the sound of the flute. They are drawn to it. I saw this virtually every time I remained at Soaring Eagle to observe after teaching the Cultural Arts class. I remained in the same room because two of my student participants took math at that time. As other students came in, they passed by the table of unfinished flutes, usually picking one up to try. I recalled how Lenmana pulled her flute out in math class “tooted it, grinned, and put it back” (Field notes, January 17, 2006). She connected with it in such a way she wanted to continue playing.

Hania Maska saw first hand how students responded to making and learning to play their Northern Spirit Flutes, and learning the cultural history behind the instrument.

Well I see it connecting really well because the kids are putting a lot of effort into taking pride in fixing up or making their flutes by the way they paint their flutes. They are putting their own personality into their flute and the fact that they play their flute and they are learning they are wanting to learn. I think that says a lot about the learning that the kids are going through. Those are actions that I am describing. Now actions speak better than words, now if they did a messy job in painting and they really didn't have any pride, they really didn't want to play it then the actions would say, well that kid is not interested. But, we're seeing the enthusiasm, the creativity, we're seeing an awakening. We are seeing something coming out of the children or the young people that they are learning about the flute, or they are making the flute. So that says many things to me about what I see and what you're sharing and that what you are sharing is affecting those young people. So overall it's a good deal. Good medicine. (Recorded conversation, February 27, 2006, pp. 17-18)

“Actions speak better than words.” Hania knows the students at Soaring Eagle extremely well, having also taught at the sister Catholic core community school to Pleasant Hill Community School, where I taught. He recognized the emotional response students were having by their “enthusiasm, creativity, and awakening” through making their Northern Spirit Flutes. I couldn’t help but notice how Hania called it “good medicine,” the same words used by Elder Roland Duquette in regards to music in First Nations culture, and to Kenntech in terms of laughter (Recorded conversation, December 5, 2006, p. 14).

### *Feeling Tingles and Sadness*

Near the beginning of my research, I gave Onawa Gaho some of the students’ journal writing to read. She said “it gave her tingles to read what the students had written” (Field notes, January 19, 2006).

Yesterday was fun and exciting for me because when I first heard Mr. Dubé play his flute I really was interested in how to make one. I was kind of not wanting to drill the holes because I was scared I would mess up and I did but I was so glad that I could make another one. I just love the way the flute sounds. It’s really calming... Today was just as fun as yesterday because I really like my design that I’ve drawn. . . . My flute is going to look awesome!! Thank you for coming and teaching us how to make these flutes. I can’t wait till we learn how to actually play!! (Shysie, Journal writing, January 18-19)



I felt addicted. I just wanted to play and play. (Aleshanee, January 18, 2006)

Then, Onawa Gaho asked me how reading the students’ words made me feel. As I reflected, I felt those same tingles, mixed with joy and sadness. I felt tears well up in my eyes. I was happy the flute was connecting in such a meaningful and powerful way, while

at the same time I felt a profound sadness because students hadn't had the chance to do this sooner (Field notes, January 19, p. 2). I wondered how their lives may have been different had they felt more connected to their emotions. Could playing the Northern Spirit flute have guided them to a smoother road in their life's journey?

### *Feeling Excitement, Pride, and Love*

Student participants wrote about feeling excited to complete their flutes. Virtually all of them wanted to complete their flutes so they could bring them home and show them to friends, siblings, or their parent. One student wrote that completing his flute "felt so good because it was cool that [he] was making [his] very first flute. Then someday [he could] teach [his] grandkids" (Anonymous journal writing, March 27, 2006). I sensed the affection and love they felt for the significant people in their lives. They also wrote of the pride they felt in what they were accomplishing through creating their own Northern Spirit Flute.

The theme of pride came up again in the context of performing, for both students and their parents. This sense of pride developing in students was also recognized by the adult participants. Onawa spoke of how important it was to work with students' self-esteem, something I recognized early in my career at Pleasant Hill. Kachina told me how proud she felt when she heard her daughter play her Northern Spirit Flute and how it gave her "a sense of accomplishment. She could do it" (Recorded conversation, May 10, p. 9). She appreciated how the flute gave her daughter something positive to do at home after school and that "the extra praise that she gets is really good for her" (p. 10). Shima Anevay echoed the same parental sentiments saying she "felt so proud" when she heard Shysie playing her Northern Spirit Flute, "it was soothing" (Recorded conversation, March 6, 2006, p. 13).

### *Feeling Peaceful and Soothing*



*She plays the flute almost every single night now and so that's, it's good for our family. It's soothing. A lot of times I am falling asleep listening to her play the flute instead of me playing it on the CD player. So, it's good. I am happy that she learned and I think she's happy too that she learned. I think that's why she continues to play it. (Anna Hantaywee, Recorded conversation, March 19, 2006, p. 3)*

Throughout my time at Soaring Eagle School of Excellence, students, staff, and parents all recognized there was a peaceful, soothing quality to the flute – a “gentle power.” In comparison to other things or even other musical instruments, Sakima recognized that

it is different when you hear a flute being played somewhere you can just hear it. I think someone walking into the school would be like, wow it is peaceful in here, you know. So it's just another way of getting to the core of the kids and help them find their gift, you know. (Recorded conversation, March 15, 2006, p. 15)

From the research participants' responses, there is no doubt in my mind that hearing the Northern Spirit Flute evokes deep, heartfelt emotions in even the most sports minded administrators and street hardened students who are functioning in vigilance mode. The gentle sound effortlessly penetrates the most hardened shells and provides the opportunity to help awaken that which is already there inside of our students, their humanity. I strongly believe that if we don't at least try to awaken their emotions, we are denying our most fragile students their own humanity, their place to belong in the world. The Northern Spirit Flute and the Songs of the Spirit curriculum enable both teacher and students to intuitively teach and learn from their hearts, their emotions. Because “if you

don't feel joy, all these emotions that were GIVEN to us . . . that you will die, you'll die inside. You know. . . . and you will lose your humanity. You'll become a robot"

(Kenneth Charlette, Recorded conversation, December 5, pp. 34-35).



## CHAPTER 9

### NITOHTA, KĒSYIHTA, NISITOHTA<sup>34</sup> – LISTEN, LEARN, UNDERSTAND

#### Looking Backward – Looking Forward

##### *Many Shades of Gray*

As I look backward to where I came from, my small prairie village, my Catholic roots, my naïve beginnings, a small part of me romantically yearns for the unquestioning simplicity of black and white, right and wrong answers, to be told what that one and only truth is. There is something enticing and seductive about living in the past, the comfort of ignorance, passing on the responsibility for thinking to someone else – someone more educated, someone in a higher position of power – and to absolve myself from having to open my eyes to see what is right in front of me. The old part of me finds it very comforting to accept the idea that my life is good because I have been good. I have followed the rules, the commandments.

But then, I move forward through all my lived experiences and I awaken. Like Innes, I unlearned what I had learned because “all that I had thought I knew, I found incorrect.” I too, had “to begin again.” I had to ask questions and relearn. I had no choice. My experiences as a music teacher working with Aboriginal children in core neighborhoods compelled me to think critically, to ask even the uncomfortable questions about issues such as societal and systemic racism, about the history of residential schooling, about our complicity in cycles of poverty and substance abuse, and to continually seek the truth, or at the very least, to be able to see and acknowledge the many shades of gray between truth and untruth.

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<sup>34</sup> The title is written in lower case, as Onawa Gaho informed me that there are no capitals in Cree.

### ***Awakening Truths***

Absolutely new truths are very rare. Truths which were once new must be constantly renewed by being pronounced again from the depths of the ardent personal convictions of a new human being.

(Ellen Key in Brendtro, Brokenleg, & Van Bockern, 1990, p. 1)

My research journey stirred within me the desire to continue exploring both the new truths and those already there, and to explore that which resides in the gray areas in between the black and white of truth and untruth. Regardless of the color of our skin, our religion, our socio-economic background, or whether we live connected or apart from other sentient beings, we breathe the same air, we walk the same earth, we are warmed by the same sun, and finally, we are all reconnected, whether we choose to be or not – through death – returning to the earth from which we all come. We are all inescapably connected and in relationship with each other in our shared life journeys.

### ***Let the Healing Journey Begin***

My lived landscape shaped my life just as the lived landscapes of my students, their parents, and their grandparents shaped theirs. Having children stolen away from their families to go to residential schools, many of which were more work camps than school, broke the spirit of many First Nations people. The impact of this human experiment is still being felt today. Many First Nations people continue to feel invisible in today's society. I believe that facing the truth about what took place in the past is crucially important at this point in the evolution of our society. This will allow us to provide opportunities for First Nations people who have been harmed by the residential school experience to connect spiritually and begin their healing journey. I believe the Elders when they tell me that music, "powerful medicine," can be an important part of

this healing journey (Alo Apenimon, recorded conversation, 2006; Roland Duquette, personal communication, 1998). My research leads me to believe the Songs of the Spirit curriculum can be used as a very effective way to reach students who have struggled in their schooling, who are lost on the ice floes. The Medicine Wheel and Tipi Teachings can serve as road maps and guides on this healing journey. I think they can help bring about a rebalancing of educational priorities to better meet the needs of Aboriginal students today.

### **I Find Some of My Answers**

#### ***The Tipi Teaching of Thankfulness***

*Hi Richard*

*It was a pleasure to get to know you. I just want to tell you that I want to thank you from the bottom of my heart for helping my daughter with her flute. May the Creator bless you in all his goodness and watch over you and your family.*

*Respectfully  
Anna Hantaywee*

*(Email communication, March 2006)*

As I read Anna Hantaywee's email, I felt honored she took the time to write and thank me for teaching her daughter how to make and play her Northern Spirit Flute. In my heart, I really appreciated the blessings she extended to me and to my family. It left me hopeful that Lenmana's flute playing is helping to bring some healing to Anna and her children as they recover from the loss of her son, their brother.

Anna and the other research participants confirm what I felt intuitively over years of teaching students how to make and play the Northern Spirit Flute and the Songs of the Spirit curriculum. Learning to play the Northern Spirit Flute is impacting the emotional and spiritual aspect of students' being. The experience is so intrinsically motivating that

senior students who have been in vigilance mode choose to play the Northern Spirit Flute rather than participate in “running haphazardly being children” (Wicasa Langundo, Recorded conversation, 2006).

I wonder how providing this type of learning opportunity to a larger number of Aboriginal students from across the province might impact their overall learning and their success in school and in life. I wonder what roads students may choose or what identities they may take on if they are provided with such an opportunity.

### *The Reality of the Here and Now*

And now we're living in a world where a lot of our young people are adopting . . . other people's cultures, or newly invented cultures. Uhh and losing a part of who they are. And they're saying, “Well that's pretty stupid.” But some just diving right in. And when you look at the bigger picture, why? It's because they don't know who they are. And they're willing, they're willing, to adopt another culture, okay. I mean you have to look at the problems around us **gangs, drugs, alcohol**. Why is that? A loss of one's self-esteem opens the door to negativity, to imbalance, to ignorance. There are people in this world that are willing to capitalize on that. You know what I mean? I'm not, you know . . . I'm not walking around with blindfolds on. I see the world for what it is. You know. But. In all fairness to ahh, to the way things are, it's like we've created a part of this mess and we've allowed a part of this mess. But at some point as a responsible human being, you need to stand up . . . What's that old saying . . . By not saying anything, you're also . . . a part of the problem. [pause] So it's time. It's time to stand up and it's time to wake up . . . and be counted for. I want to do my part. (Kennetch Charlette, recorded conversation, December 5, 2005, p. 46)

Like Kennetch, I too want to do my part. I came to recognize the “power and the truth behind the arts” and the “healing” that can come from engaging youth in artistic experiences through the Songs of the Spirit curriculum.

### **Why the Arts? Why the Native American Flute?**



*I found, that there is no difference in our hearts. That the Spirit speaks one language. I found that one language that we all spoke and wrote. I found the incredible beauty that exists all around us . . . . The arts is power beyond your imagination when you look into the truth. . . you can see that it’s a part of every human being and that all you have to do is awaken it. And you can help awaken it. And that behind the arts just lies an incredible way of life that is a part of what the Creator intended for all of us. That’s why the arts. (Kennetch Charlette, December 5, 2006, p. 47)*

When I replay the scenes of Kachina coming to play the piano, helping Nitika to make it to the summer program, or of observing Jack sit beside his son Josh at the piano, I become keenly aware of how important it is simply on the human level to do my part in helping to make the world a better place. Both my heart and my mind tell me that “contradicting the established, or the given” is perhaps the only way to lead those of us “who are willing to risk transformations to the shaping of social vision” (Greene, 1995, p. 30). Like Greene, “I connect the arts to discovering cultural diversity, to making community, to becoming wide-awake to the world” (p. 4). The Songs of the Spirit curriculum enables Aboriginal students to explore their diverse cultures while making community with those around them. I believe the sound of the flute helps to call students

in from the ice floes, the chaos of their lived lives, long enough to open the door for them to see new possibilities, to imagine alternative realities for themselves (Greene, 1995).

I cannot stand by unawake, in silence, and allow my children to be exposed to the same untruths that I grew up with, false stories of Aboriginal peoples, only to have to unlearn them later. I need to ensure they and other children have the opportunity to learn our shared history, both sides of it, all of it. I believe it is incumbent upon us as moral human beings to accept our most disadvantaged children and youth, many who are Aboriginal, as if they are members of our own immediate family. I believe “we are all one people” (Naytowhow & L’Hirondelle, 2000). A critical question to ask is, “Will Aboriginal children be given the opportunity to be productive, self-fulfilled, contributors to society or will they continue to be marginalized by those who have their cultural, emotional, physical and spiritual needs met?”

### ***Engaging Aboriginal Youth***

The teachings I received from Elders, from mentors, and from my life’s experiences caused me to believe “human beings make music because it enables us to act and experience ourselves as passionate, communal, and spiritual people, an amalgam of mind, body, and spirit” (Harris, 2006, p. 6). I witnessed youth like Cocheta and Liluye participate in something that is both meaningful and powerful, and as a result feel empowered and in control, something that has been missing in their lives. They were empowered to connect inwardly to their spirit, outwardly to others, and to the “Great Spirit.” Like Bouvier and Ward (2001), I came to believe that “spirituality is the key to understanding Aboriginal world views” (p. 8). In addition, this research affirms the spiritual connection fostered through the Songs of the Spirit curriculum empowers students to envision new realities for themselves.

If we accept what Harris (2006) says, that “music is an amalgam of mind, body, and spirit” (p. 6), and what Ward and Bouvier (2001) say, that “*the* goals of education include spiritual development,”(p. 183), then it stands to reason that making music, because of its inherent spiritual component, serves as an excellent means for Aboriginal youth to connect with the spirit and the creative imagination that is inherent within them. Through music they are empowered to “find models and pathways that help them move beyond themselves to connect with others and to make contributions for the greater good” (Sterling, 1998, p. 66). As an adult, an educator, a member of our community, and a citizen of the world, I believe we are able to set the stage for success so Aboriginal youth are empowered to meet their cultural, emotional, and spiritual needs.

The research participants believe the Songs of the Spirit curriculum, learning how to make and play a PVC version of the Native American Flute and learning the history and cultural aspects of the flute, helps Aboriginal students attend to their emotional and spiritual needs. Could it be possible that other youth could gain the same amount of self-confidence and self-esteem that Cocheta and Liluye achieved from learning how to make and play the Native American Flute? Could this enable them to connect with the greater world, see themselves as an integral part of that world, and invite them realize their potential in that world?

The lived lives and the landscapes of our students’ lives should dictate how and what is relevant to teach our students, as well as what the starting place for our teaching should be. This in turn will help guide us to what is really worth teaching and measuring in educating children who are recovering from the residual impact and trauma of the residential school experience. We are guided through life by the experiences that touch us

emotionally. These experiences in-turn shape our beliefs and the assumptions that we take with us in our professional and personal lives. If we take the time to recognize we are the sum of these emotional experiences, we will realize that we are the sum of our storied experiences. We will have the opportunity to awaken and look through new eyes.

Working together, both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal, side by side to make the changes that will lead to increased healing, educational, and life success for all of our youth, will broaden our understandings beyond solely our own vantage point. Gaining an understanding of the Medicine Wheel & Tipi Teachings, the four aspects of self, our relationship with each other and all that is around us, will promote life's healing journey for many of our young people. When we address the balancing of the four aspects of being, we will begin to nurture the spirit of our young people and their families, thus facilitating healing.

When we choose to attend to students' emotional and spiritual needs through culturally relevant curriculum, we provide them with the opportunity to connect both inwardly and outwardly with the beauty all around them. When we make a place in public school to nurture the spirit of our Aboriginal children and we address what is missing in current curriculum offerings, we give our students, their families, their schools, and communities the transformative feeling of hope. As we recognize the strength and value of Indigenous epistemology and the fact that it may nurture parts of students that enable them to achieve more success in both school and life and as we choose to *nitohta, kēsyihta, nisitohta* – listen, learn, and understand – we bring about fundamental change in how education is viewed and provided for our most disadvantaged and vulnerable students. By awakening truths and recognizing the many shades of gray

between truth and untruth, we continue to move forward in education to better meet the needs of our Aboriginal students.

***Education that Engages Every Part of One's Being***

*Education is longing for a deeper more connected, more inclusive, and more aware way of knowing. One that connects heart and hand and head and does not split knowledge into dualities of thought and being, mind and body, emotion and intellect, but resonates with a wholeness and fullness that engages every part of one's being. Engagement with the arts is one way hope is offered to education to become something more than a rational, intellectual endeavor where children's minds are developed at the expense of their bodily, emotional, and spiritual well being. (Kind, Irwin, Grauer, & de Cosson, 2005, p. 33)*

This common theme was found in both my academic research and *he alo a he alo*, face to face, conversations. I heard repeatedly from both sources that “Indian knowledge of the universe was never separated from other sacred knowledge about ultimate spiritual realities. The spiritual aspect of knowledge about the world taught the people that relationships must not be left incomplete” (Hanohano, 1999, p. 215).

I return to the question I asked in Chapter 6. How important is it to give First Nations students their voice in curriculum, to feel connected, and empowered? I believe the answer can be found in Hanohano's (2001) words. “It is this spiritual knowledge that is essential to all Native cultures that we hope to rediscover and restore to our contemporary educational systems to bring harmony and balance back into the lives of Native people – thus education for meaning” (Hanohano, 2001, p. 211).

This research shows that the Songs of the Spirit curriculum provides Aboriginal students with an opportunity to connect with the positive side of their cultures through

what research participants called the “soothing” and “healing” sound of the Native American Flute, thus helping to balance the four aspects of their being.

### **Broader Implications for Future Research**

I return again to the question I asked in Chapter 6, “How important is it to give First Nations students their voice in curriculum, to feel connected, and empowered?” when I think about teacher education programs. What might a teacher education program begin to look like if it nurtured and encouraged respectful engagement with Aboriginal people, including students, parents, teachers, administration, and Elders? How might we invite prospective teachers to attend to this voice in their planning and teaching? I am encouraged by individual efforts already underway in the College of Education at the University of Saskatchewan. I see Pushor inviting Elders in to teacher education classes to share their teachings, organizing field trips so teacher candidates can visit First Nations schools, and conducting *he alo a he alo*, face to face, research through her work on parent engagement with Aboriginal parents at core neighborhood schools. I see Ward, another forward looking educator in the faculty, drawing on her many years of practical experience teaching and researching in First Nations schools, in her teacher education classes. What I feel is important to complement these individual efforts is systemic program renewal by education faculties to incorporate culturally-responsive courses and pedagogy in their programs, renewal efforts in which Aboriginal people are engaged in the design and implementation. In renewed programs such as these, I see real possibility for teacher candidates to be provided with ongoing opportunities to have *he alo a he alo*, face to face, experiences with Aboriginal students, teachers, and schools and to learn to

teach against and challenge the stereotypes and bigotry still pervasive in many parts of our current education system and society.

My research also raises questions for me about curriculum. I have come to see how important it is that curricula reflect and honor Indigenous epistemology, addressing the four aspects of being in a truly balanced way. How can we move school curricula away from a Eurocentric conceptualization of education which separates and compartmentalizes subject matter (Dewey, 1938) to learning which attends to the emotional and spiritual needs of all students (Bouvier & Ward, 2001; Brendtro, Brokenleg and Van Bockern, 1990; Doige, 2003; Freire, 1989; Hanohano, 2001 & 1999; Innes, 1884; Kind, S., Irwin, R. L., Grauer, K., & de Cosson, A., 2005; Kozol, 2005; Lee, 2006; Pushor & Murphy, in press; RCAP, 1996; Sewall, 1996; Tillson, 2002; Ward & Wasson-Elam, 1995).

How might curriculum development and renewal be enacted if Elders and First Nations, Métis, and Inuit leaders are included and consulted in such processes? How might dialogue between all stakeholders end the silencing that has failed to meet the needs of many of our Aboriginal students and their families? Would such renewal create curricula that reflect the changing face of our society, that foster an understanding of how we came to be where we are today, that provide students with the opportunity to learn about both sides of our shared history, that are culturally responsive? I believe that if we invite the voice of Aboriginal people to speak alongside ours, the development of well rounded, holistic, rich, and thoughtful curricula, like the Songs of the Spirit curriculum, we will meet the emotional and spiritual needs of our Aboriginal students – as well as all others.

### *Closing Thoughts and Feelings*

In the end, for me, it is about spirit. Like Elder Onida Shimasani, I live to “see the spirit grow in children.” This is what best feeds my spirit and gives me strength. Knowing that somehow I have helped *soothe* or *reconnect* even one of the “little spirits,” as Hania Maska so eloquently put it, who are struggling to find their place in the world makes me feel I have done my small part in trying to leave the earth and all its sentient beings in a better state than when I came into it. The email from Anna Hantaywee, received as I concluded my research at Soaring Eagle School of Excellence, leads me to believe I am on the right track, that I should continue in my practice as a teacher and researcher, to “refuse mere compliance, to look down roads not taken,” to do my job well.

The Native American Flute knows few cultural boundaries. The soothing human melodies and gentle tone quality of the instrument is undeniably attractive as it caresses one’s eardrums. Perhaps, through this music, even non-Aboriginal people can become so positively connected to First Nations cultures that we can begin to see the beauty and humanely intelligent wisdom of our land’s first inhabitants. Like Greene (1995), “I am convinced that, in the domains of education today, people can choose to resist the thoughtlessness, banality, technical rationality, carelessness, and ‘savage inequalities’ (Kozol, 1991) that now undermine public education at every turn” (p. 2). As teachers, we have the responsibility to think and imagine possibilities not yet realized of what might be. We too can be creators and purveyors of change.



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