

Following the Song of *k'aad 'aww* (Dogfish Mother): Adolescent Perspectives on English 10

First Peoples, Writing, and Identity

by

Sara Florence Davidson

B. Sc., Dalhousie University, 1995

Diploma in Education, The University of British Columbia (Vancouver), 2005

M. A., The University of British Columbia (Vancouver), 2008

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to explore how identity texts and narrative writing could strengthen adolescents' writing and support adolescents' identity explorations. The study took place in an English 10 First Peoples class in a small, remote community in northern British Columbia. The context was highly unique; therefore, the study also includes findings regarding the students' and community's response to a compulsory course with Indigenous content, the struggles for educators teaching the course, and the perceived strengths of the course.

This qualitative case study (Stake, 1995) was guided by the metaphor of the Haida dogfish mother. It drew upon Indigenous storywork principles (Archibald, 2008) to create an ethical framework that extended beyond institutional standards for ethical conduct in research. This merging of methodologies invited improvisation, dialogue, and inner reflection to explore the role of stories, ancestry, history, and lived experiences in this research.

Indigenous and non-Indigenous students, teachers, administrators, community members, and a parent were interviewed and observations were conducted in the English 10 First Peoples classroom, and the data were analyzed using the iterations of the *k'aad 'aww* dance. The findings from this study indicated that adolescents generally engage more with writing that is based on topics of their choice and personal experiences. The adolescents shared ways that writing transformed their lives and strengthened their relationships. They also appreciated the inclusion of non-writing activities in their English language arts class.

In this study, the resistance to English 10 First Peoples as a required course resulted in racially discriminatory conversations. These suggest the need to further explore ways to ensure all students and educators have access to accurate and respectful Indigenous content and history and to ensure that educators are not engaging in a racism of low expectations (Auditor General of

British Columbia, 2015). The educators offered suggestions for improved support for courses that are rich in Indigenous content and pedagogical practices; overall they expressed that the strengths of the course far outweighed the struggles. All of the participants in this study emphasized the importance of building strong relationships between students and educators.

Preface

This dissertation is the original intellectual product of the author, S. F. Davidson. The photographs are the property of the author, S. F. Davidson, unless otherwise indicated. The research findings reported in Chapters 6 to 11 are covered by UBC Ethics Certificate number H14-02558 and the stories shared by R. Davidson throughout the dissertation are covered by UBC Ethics certificate number H14-01170.

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Canada

For the children

who know me as Auntie

and the students

who knew me as their teacher.

You are my inspiration

to do this work.

My name is Sara Florence Davidson.

*My mother chose the name Sara
because she wanted me to have a beautiful name.
Florence is the name of my great grandmother
whom my parents wished to honour.
She used to tell my father
she would come back as his daughter,
so he would make her lots of bracelets.
But I was lucky
because she remained with us
long after I was born.
The name Davidson was given to my great-grandfather
by the missionaries when they gave out English names.*

*The Haida people are matrilineal
which means our identities are passed to us
through our mothers.
Because my mother is a yaatz xaadee,¹
she was adopted by my father's naanii,²
so my brother and I
had a place among the Haida.*

*The Haida name that I use in my work
is sgaan jaadgu saandlans.
It means killer whale woman of the dawn.
My father's name is guud saandlans.
It means eagle of the dawn.
Though we are connected through our mothers,
this Haida name connects me to my father as well.
It allows me to feel the strength of both of my parents and their ancestors.*

*I am from multiple worlds;
I drew on the strengths of all these worlds for this work.*



Figure 1. Tangled Trees.³

Part I: Finding Myself in *k'aad 'aww*⁴



Figure 2. Dogfish Mother mask. Art by Ben Davidson/Photograph by Jason Shafto. Used with permission.

I do not remember

*the first time
I saw her face*

*Only that I was momentarily confused
by the whiteness of her mask*

*But it did not hide
the Haida etched into the crevasses
of her face.*

*A shadow
stretched out from a darkened corner
and bled into the bright*

*She is emerging
from darkness, I thought,
and coming into the light*

*Like the raven
in the old stories
who stole back the light
to share it with the world*

*And I wondered what lessons,
she would have to teach...*

*I did not know then
that from the depths
of her eyes
my own reflection
would emerge.*



Figure 3. Morning Reflections.⁵

Chapter 1: The Story of the Dogfish Mother



Figure 4. Vanishing Tide.⁶

There is a story that my father tells when we are about to perform the shark dance⁷. It is about a man who went out to the beach at low tide to “take care of nature,” and he heard an unusual sound. When he followed it, he came upon a dogfish mother who had been caught on the outgoing tide. She was in her last throes of life, and her chant was like nothing he had ever heard before. The man memorized her song before returning her to the ocean, and it evolved to become the shark dance that we perform today.

When I was learning to perform the dance, my uncle would watch me. He said I must never move in exact time to the drum, as we did for other dances. He said it compromised the fluidity of the dance and removed the illusion that I was moving through water. Instead, I was supposed to sway back and forth on my own, occasionally moving more quickly as I fought a small current.

There were no rules about when to quicken my movements; they had to be improvised.

When we perform with our Haida dance group, the Rainbow Creek Dancers, my father often shares stories about the origin of the songs in between the dances. This educates the audience about what they are witnessing and also gives the dancers enough time to change into the regalia to accompany the next dance performance. One of the songs that we perform is called *k'aad 'aww* or the shark dance. When I asked my father for more information about the origin of the song, he told me that in 1980, he hosted a feast, and there he had seen a group of singers from Hydaburg, Alaska, performing the dance. They did not wear masks, but they mimicked the movements of the shark as they danced in a circle. My father was so taken with the performance that he traveled to Hydaburg to ask permission to use the song and to perform the dance. He told me that he asked Helen Sanderson because she was of the *yahgu jaanaas* clan, which owned the song and the dance, and she gave him permission to sing and perform the song and dance (R. Davidson, personal communication, September 29, 2015). According to the Haida Gwaii Singers Society (2009), “in 1982, Robert Davidson [my father] traded the Women’s Lullaby with the people of Hydaburg at the ‘Tribute to the Living Haida’ potlatch so that the Massett Haida could use this song once again” (p. 32).

When I was seeking guidance on how to gain permission to use this story in my dissertation, my father told me about the protocols connected with this song. The man on the beach did not get permission in the same way that my father did. As my father explained, in those days, experiences such as these could be claimed differently. The fact that the man saved the life of the dogfish mother and was inspired by the experience, allowed him to claim the right to it. Then later, ownership likely came with an adoption of the experience in a more official capacity. Because this song belongs to my clan, my father felt that I did not need to seek further permission to use it here (R. Davidson, personal communication, September 29, 2015).

In her work with Indigenous storywork principles, Jo-ann Archibald⁸ (2008) explained: There is a ‘surface story’: the text, and the things one has to know about the performance of it for others. The stories are metaphoric, but there are several levels of metaphor involved. The text, combined with the performance, contains a ‘key’ or a ‘clue’ to unlock the metaphor. When a hearer has that story, and knows the narrative sequence of it, there is another story contained within that story, like a completely different embedded or implicit text. (p. 84)

As I sought to find the connection between the various aspects of my study, the story of the dogfish mother returned to me, and I came to recognize that this story could be understood as a surface story. As I worked more closely with the story, I learned how it could be used as a metaphor for the research study. In the same way that the hearer of a story unlocks different levels, I too understood the dance and my research more deeply by working with the story – the understanding of each helped me to further understand the other more deeply in a synergistic way.

When I worked with the story as a metaphor, I recognized that, as the researcher, I was the one who was walking on the beach and came upon the dogfish mother. In this interpretation, the dogfish mother represents the participants in this research who must be treated with reverence. This is demonstrated by the fact that the dogfish mother was returned to the ocean when she had finished teaching the man. The beach or the place where the ocean meets the shore is the context where this research took place. The way that the man memorized the chant is the way in which I worked with the participants to understand their perspectives. In the performance of the shark dance, the beat of the drum is the case study research methodology that I used to guide my process, and the song represents the Indigenous storywork principles (Archibald, 2008)

that I used as an Indigenous ethical framework to guide my conduct. Though I followed the case study methodology and an Indigenous ethical framework throughout this process, there were moments of improvisation when I had to determine how to proceed entirely on my own.

An Overview of the Research Journey

In December 2014, I moved to Haida Gwaii in preparation to do my doctoral research on literacy and identity. I planned to do a case study (Stake, 1995) to learn more about how identity texts (Cummins & Early, 2011) could be used to enrich the writing process; how narrative writing could be used to strengthen student writing; and how narrative writing could support students' identity explorations. I had chosen this particular location because it is the traditional territory of my ancestors on my father's side of my family, and I wanted to give back to this community that had financially supported me in my educational endeavours. Because of my connection to the islands, I also felt confident in my understanding of local protocols and practices and my ability to navigate these to conduct my research respectfully.

In mid-January, 2015, I received approval from both UBC Behavioural Research Ethics and the local School Board to proceed with my study. However, I also learned that the current classroom teacher would be replaced by another teacher in the following month. Though initially concerned I would need to seek another site to do the study, I was reassured by the principal that I would be allowed to continue my study in that class with the new teacher. Once I gained access to the school, in late January, I began observing from the back of the English 10 First Peoples class. Each class, I would show up with my notebook and my knitting. This may seem a peculiar detail, but I find that students often forget that I am there if I appear to be otherwise occupied – so I knit socks as I observed the students in the class.

For the first month, I remained at the back of the class making observations and waiting for the next teacher to arrive so I could ensure that they⁹ were comfortable with the direction of the study. They arrived in mid-February, and they were very receptive to the study as it was, so no changes were necessary. For the next month, we sat together at the back of the class as we waited for the first teacher to make the transition out of the class and the new teacher to take over. During this time, we would also meet regularly outside of class time to plan the identity unit that they would be teaching as part of the study. In addition, I put up signs in the community advertising an information session for parents and inviting any community members to contact me if they wished to participate in the study.

In early March, the new teacher took over the class, and I finally began inviting students to participate in interviews for the study. I also began interviewing community members as they contacted me to schedule interviews. In April, the students began working on identity texts in class, and I began interviewing educators and administrators who contacted me to schedule interviews. By late April the students began to work on their narrative essays as part of the identity unit. In late May, I completed my final classroom observation, as the students completed their narrative essays. My participant interviews were completed by mid-June, 2015.

Four students, three educators, three administrators, two community members, and one parent volunteered to be interviewed for this study. Because of the small size of the community, I have made every attempt to mask their identities; this has taken precedence over providing additional personal information to contextualize their interview excerpts. However, I will share that each group of students, educators, and administrators consisted of both male and female participants as well as Indigenous¹⁰ and non-Indigenous participants, while the community and parent groups were less representative.

An Overview of the Dissertation

To guide my thinking and facilitate the communication of my research journey, I have divided my dissertation into four parts: Finding Myself in *k'aad 'aww* (Introduction); Following the Teachings of *k'aad 'aww* (Methodology); The Song of *k'aad 'aww* (Findings); and Becoming *k'aad 'aww* (Reflections).

Finding myself in *k'aad 'aww*. This part consists of two chapters to provide an introduction to this dissertation. In Chapter 1: The Story of the Dogfish Mother, I introduce the story of *k'aad 'aww* and provide a brief overview of the role that the story played in my work. In Chapter 2: Finding Myself in the Dogfish Mother Mask, I explore my positioning within this work using the dogfish mother mask as a metaphor for my understanding of how my identities are formed.

Following the teachings of *k'aad 'aww*. This part consists of three chapters that together describe the methodology that I used to conduct this research. In Chapter 3: Ethical Framework, I describe how I used the Indigenous storywork principles (Archibald, 2008) to create an ethical framework for my study. In Chapter 4: The Teachings of the Dogfish Mother (Methodology), I describe how I used case study methodology (Stake, 1995) that was informed by my ethical framework and other Indigenous perspectives to complete my study. In Chapter 5: The Iterations of the Dance (Data Analysis), I describe how I drew upon the work of Indigenous and non-Indigenous scholars to create a method of data analysis that is explained using the iterations of the dance.

The song of *k'aad 'aww*. This part consists of six chapters that have been separated thematically to reflect the findings from this study. In Chapter 6: Community and Home Perspectives on Literacy, I provide contextual information about the community and home views

on literacy. In Chapter 7: Perspectives on Student Writing, I share the views of the students, educators, and community members on student writing. In Chapter 8: Perspectives on Writing at Home and School, I share the differences between home and school writing as well as perspectives on writing at school. In Chapter 9: English 10 First Peoples, I provide an overview about the course and share some of the resistance to the course as it was expressed by the participants. In Chapter 10: Struggles and Strengths of Teaching English 10 First Peoples, I provide an overview of the struggles that educators have teaching the course, as well as the strengths that the participants identified for Indigenous and non-Indigenous students taking the course. In Chapter 11: Perspectives on Identity and Relationships, I share the information connected to the original research questions with regard to identity, identity texts, narrative writing, and relationships. I also reflect on findings from the study and how they pertain to racism in schooling.

Becoming *k'aad 'aww*. This part consists of two chapters that conclude this dissertation. In Chapter 12: “If not you, then who...?” I reflect on the process of doing the research and what I learned from the research journey. I also discuss the naming of the methodology that I used to complete this study. In Chapter 13: “The alphabet is the doorway to the other side...” I reflect on the contributions, limitations, implications, and applications of this research. I also share future directions for research in this area. I finish the chapter with a reflection on the significance of stories in our research and our lives.

Chapter 2: Finding Myself in the Dogfish Mother Mask



Figure 5. Dogfish Mother mask. Art by Ben Davidson/Photograph by Jason Shafto. Used with permission.

When we perform the shark dance, each dancer interprets the dance differently. We mimic the movements of the shark traveling through water. We struggle momentarily with the current. We make our way again. Though we may appear similar with our shark masks and our regalia, each dance is uniquely our own.

The Dogfish Mother Mask

A few years ago, my brother carved a large mask of the dogfish mother out of cedar. From that cedar mask, he made casts of the mask using bronze and Forton, a polymer. The dogfish mother mask made from Forton was completely white (see Figures 4 and 5). It is a stunning piece that represents for me the merging of the traditional forms of Haida art and the more recent innovations used in contemporary Haida art.

When I started to understand my study as a metaphor of the story of the dogfish mother, I began to see myself in this Forton mask. This dogfish mother is Indigenous and non-Indigenous,

and as such, exists in multiple worlds without fully belonging to any. The mask belongs to the Indigenous world because it has been created using the traditional forms and shapes of the Haida alphabet (R. Davidson, personal communication [presentation], May 5, 2015). These shapes make the mask immediately recognizable as Haida art. My father is of Haida and Tlingit ancestry, and he brought me up in the ways of the Haida. Though I did not always understand my connection to the beliefs and the practices, these experiences make me Indigenous (Banks, 1998). My Indigenous identity often grants me access to Indigenous worlds.

The dogfish mother mask is also non-Indigenous because it is made of white Forton. This is a new material, and it represents more recent innovations in Haida art with the incorporation of modern and human made materials. My mother is of Euro-Canadian ancestry and she worked very diligently to raise me in ways that were congruent with and honoured Haida practices and protocols while also drawing upon her Euro-Canadian roots. As such, I am usually comfortable with mainstream schooling practices and Euro-Canadian ways to demonstrate knowledge. As an educator, I have also felt fairly comfortable in an education system that is deeply entrenched in Euro-Canadian educational practices. This dogfish mother mask exists between Indigenous and non-Indigenous worlds. While it draws on the strength of these worlds, it does not fully belong in any of them. As Margaret Kovach (2013) described, “for many Indigenous educators, there is an emotional and psychic cost to constantly negotiating these [the dominant Eurocentric paradigm and an Indigenous consciousness] dual, often contradictory awarenesses and ways of doing and being” (p. 114).

I remember early on in my master’s degree, I worked on a project for a Narrative Inquiry class. I created a poster with 100 replicas of a single image of my face, each with a different one of my identities carefully typed beneath it. I quickly wrote “Aboriginal” and carried on with

others. Later, as I worked to think of the last remaining few, I thought about “Caucasian.” I struggled with it because I have always identified with my Indigenous ancestry. I have black hair, brown eyes, olive skin; I am not visibly Caucasian. And yet, my genetic ancestry would dictate that I am just as much Caucasian as I am Indigenous. In non-Indigenous contexts, my appearance has always set me apart. In Indigenous communities, I am reminded of my Euro-Canadian ancestry, which means that I am not “authentic.” I am both, and yet I feel that I am neither.

I recognize that it is problematic, but I feel most authentically Indigenous when my hair is long, when I am in my regalia at a potlatch, or when I am speaking dialect with other Indigenous people. I feel white when I am at home working on my schoolwork, when I am reading about Russian literary theorists, when I am writing papers using words with more syllables than I need. But then, sometimes, I feel like I have sold out, as though I am compromising a part of myself. When we were young, my brother wanted to be fully Indigenous, and he asked if he could make a trade: his white half for my Indigenous half. Sometimes I feel like it really happened.

I share my reflections on my positionality in this research because I agree with Kathy Absolon and Cam Willet (2005) who explained that “one of the most fundamental principles of Aboriginal research methodology is the necessity for the researcher to locate himself or herself” (p. 97). Furthermore, according to Robert Stake (1995)

qualitative case study is highly personal research. Persons are studied in depth.

Researchers are encouraged to include their own personal perspectives in the interpretation. The way the case and the researcher interact is presumed unique and not necessarily reproducible for other cases and researchers. (p. 135)

I believe that including my beliefs and values in this work will facilitate understanding for the readers about how I have interpreted the findings from this study. In her discussion of cultural competence in a research context, Hillary Weaver (1997) also emphasized that “it is critical that the researcher take time to reflect on his or her own beliefs, values, and biases and how these may have an impact on the research project” (p. 4). While I believe that reflecting on our positionality provides insight for readers of our research about the perspectives and understandings that we bring to our work, I recognize that this use of reflexivity is not an infallible method that absolves me of remaining vigilant in my attempts to accurately record and share what I have learned in my research.

I understand reflexivity “as involving an ongoing self-awareness during the research process which aids in making visible the practice and construction of knowledge within research in order to produce more accurate analysis of our research” (Pillow, 2003, p. 179). Though I attempt to reflect on my position within the study, I choose to move away from validated strategies of reflexivity – such as the use of reflexivity as a recognition of self, as recognition of other, as truth, and as transcendence – and, instead I attempt to move toward a reflexivity of discomfort (Pillow, 2003). In doing so, I agree that there

is the necessity of an ongoing critique of all of our research attempts, a recognition that none of our attempts can claim the innocence of success (even in failure) – with the realization that many of us do engage in research where there is real work to be done even in the face of the impossibility of such a task. (Pillow, 2003, p. 192)

It is my hope to engage in “practices of reflexivity that allow readers to ‘speak back’ to the text and engage in questioning that is different from the dialogue possible in simple confessional-tale or truth-claim accounts” (Pillow, 2003, p. 190).

While positioning myself in my master's thesis (Davidson, 2008), I identified myself as an Indigenous-outsider (Banks, 1998), one who was

socialized within the cultural community but has experienced high levels of desocialization and cultural assimilation into an outside or oppositional culture or community. The values, beliefs, perspectives, and knowledge of this individual are indistinguishable from those of an outside culture or community. (p. 8)

When I attempted to place myself on this binary scale once again, I recognized that this typology was limiting and far too oversimplified. As I endeavoured to articulate my own positioning within this research, my committee suggested I return to the metaphor of the mask. In doing so, I came upon a description that my father had written about his understanding of the relationship between the song, the mask, and the dance when we are performing ceremonial dances – a process he described as “becoming the mask.” According to my father,

masks play important roles in many ceremonies, displaying one's crests, illustrating myth, personal, and clan histories, calling on supernatural and spirit beings, and transforming one into another. Our words for masks can give us insight into the roles. For example, the Haida word for mask is *nijangu*, which means “to imitate.” When the mask is danced accompanied by the song, the dancer becomes the mask.... The mask imitates the being. The dancer makes the mask real. The song connects us all with our spirit. We can now become the mask [emphasis in original]. (Davidson, 2008, pp. 114-115)

In this description, I found a way to articulate the role of our history, experiences, and how we are positioned in determining our identities, so I used it as a framework for the lens through which I wished to explore my own positioning in this research – one that did not limit my

positions. For my discussion here, I use the framework of the song, the mask, and the dance as a metaphor to further explore my positionality within this research.

Because my understanding of identities aligns closely with the work of Dorothy Holland and Jean Lave's (2001) work on history in person, I take up some of their ideas in this discussion. The central theme of history in person is that "history is constituted in the space that encompasses both social participation and self-authoring. Dialogically constituted identities are always re-forming somewhere between positions institutionalized on social terrain and their habitation as it is made meaningful in intimate terms" (Holland & Lave, 2001, p. 29). I understand their work to mean that our identities are impermanent and we form them in dialogue with one another. These identities emerge from our social and institutional histories and the way that we are positioned and position ourselves. The concept of history in person expands upon Mikhail Bakhtin's (Holland, Lachiotte, Skinner, and Cain, 1998) notion of dialogism as it is taken up in the negotiation and impermanence of people's identities. This emphasis upon the significance of our history and experiences in positionality as well as how we are positioned is supported by Dwayne Donald's (2009) observation that

it is an ethical imperative to recognize the significance of the relationships we have with others, how our histories and experiences are layered and position us in relation to each other, and how our futures as people similarly are tied together. It is also an ethical imperative to see that, despite our varied place-based cultures and knowledge systems, we live in the world together with others and must constantly think and act with reference to these relationships. Any knowledge we gain about the world interweaves us more deeply with these relationships and gives us life. (p. 7)

I also appreciate this reminder about the significant role of relationships in creating understanding.

In my positioning, I also explore how Dorothy Holland and Jean Lave's ideas resonate with Jean-Paul Restoule's (2000) notions of identifying. In his view, "if we change the focus from identity to identifying, we move from noun to verb and set off a potentially liberating way of conceiving and talking about self-definition" (p. 103). He further explained that

identifying shifts control to the self, and motivations come to the fore. This perspective favors a set of referents that are put into action at the historical time one identifies as an Aboriginal person and in the contextual place where one identifies. Identifying is a process of being and becoming what one is in the moment [emphasis in the original]. (p. 103)

Drawing upon the metaphor of becoming the mask, the song signifies our history, experiences, and connection to our ancestors; the mask signifies how we are positioned by others as well as how we position ourselves; and the dance signifies our ability to negotiate between these multiple existences.

The song. When the Haida are performing ceremonial dances, our songs represent our connection to our ancestors. In 1884, the potlatch was banned in Canada "on the grounds that it and similar ceremonies encouraged barbarity, idleness and waste, interfered with more productive activities and generally discouraged acculturation" (Francis, 1992, p. 99). Therefore, singing these songs and passing them onto future generations represents the strength and resilience of our culture. When we sing these ancient songs, it is evidence of our abilities to resist a colonial agenda. They represent our connection to our past and our ability to thrive in the present. In this context, the song represents the history and experiences that I bring to this work.

As my father explained, we have also been able to create new songs using our knowledge of the ancient ones.

Now we sing traditional songs handed down to us through the generations. Only a few hundred songs have survived out of thousands, but there are enough to set a standard from which we can compose new songs as our ancestors did – new songs that express who we are now. (R. Davidson, personal communication [presentation], September 4, 2007)

Dorothy Holland and Jean Lave (2009) also acknowledged the critical role of our history in understanding our identities in their discussion of enduring struggles. They explained, enduring struggles exist when “...history is brought to the present through political and economic forces and cultural imaginaries that shape conflictual practices in and between institutions and collective activities” (p. 5). Margaret Kovach (2013) also noted how “acknowledging, without dismissing the past, shows respect for the history from which our current individual and collective narrative has evolved” (p. 113).

Knowing and understanding our history is a vital part of how we identify ourselves; however, we also need to be vigilant that we do not allow ourselves to remain static in the past. As Jean-Paul Restoule (2000) cautioned, when Indigenous people are labeled using a singular term, our uniqueness and our capacities to evolve and change are not recognized. When this sense of permanence exists at institutional levels, the concept of an “Aboriginal identity” can be “constrictive and colonizing” (p. 103).

Connecting to my history. I know that my research has been deeply influenced by my ancestral history which includes a grandfather who attended residential school. The devastating legacy of residential school remains ever present in Indigenous communities where the

connections between families, communities, and generations were severed so abruptly and severely as attempts were made to colonize Indigenous people in Canada.

My tsinii went to residential school. I do not know many of the details beyond some of the horror stories that were passed onto me in whispers when I was old enough to understand. I do not know the boy that he was before he was taken away, but I knew the man that he became when he returned. He existed between the worlds of the Haida chief, knowledgeable in protocols and practices, and the worlds of despair, where he often became lost and unreachable to us as grandchildren.

I try to remember his pain when I work as an educator and invite parents and families into the school. I try to remember the stories, so that I can feel compassion and not disappointment or frustration when some parents do not come to meet me. I try to remind myself that they have no way of being able to trust that I will not repeat the mistakes of my ancestors.

As an educator, I now exist in the liminal spaces between understanding the fear and mistrust of the mainstream educational system and working to ensure that Indigenous students can be academically successful in mainstream educational settings. This complex connection to schooling is a significant aspect of my positioning in this research. As a woman of mixed Indigenous ancestry, I have the history of residential school on my father's side. However, with a maternal grandfather who was an educator and a mother who excelled at postsecondary, I also have the history of success in mainstream schooling on my mother's side. Following my completion of high school, I chose to continue on to postsecondary and eventually became an educator myself. I then went back and taught in communities that had been deeply affected by residential school.

Connecting to my experiences. Over the years, I have been a special education assistant, an educator, a graduate student, and a researcher. I have worked as a classroom teacher in rural remote communities as well as remote urban settings in British Columbia and Yukon. I have worked predominantly with students of Indigenous ancestry whose needs were not being met by mainstream schooling practices. Through these experiences I came to understand that challenges with print literacy created a barrier to academic success for many of these students. While I continued to work with these students, my interest in understanding how to better support them led me to pursue a diploma and then a Master of Arts in Literacy Education. I believed that if I gained expertise in the area of culturally responsive literacy practices, I could help to improve the six-year graduation rate for Indigenous students which was approximately 50% in British Columbia at the time (British Columbia Ministry of Education, 2013). I then returned to the classroom to apply what I had learned. After a few years, I recognized that many of my students were, for the most part, comfortable with their reading; however, they remained unconfident about their writing abilities. I noticed that many conflicts in the classroom arose as a result of students struggling to express themselves in writing.

My doctoral research emerged from these experiences as a classroom teacher, specifically, the observation that I was able to establish connections with my students through the use of weekly journals. In the journals, students did not have to write using the conventional rules of grammar and spelling. Instead, students could freely write stories of their lives, and I would offer them stories of my own in return. The journals became dialogic in nature, and I believe that this also contributed to their success. Students were willing to share parts of themselves that they had been uncomfortable sharing with me in person. Through this experience, I came to agree with Carl Leggo's (2008) contention that "we need to write

autobiographically in order to connect with others” (p. 4). Based upon my success in using journals to build relationships with students in my class, I came to believe that narrative writing and in turn life writing has the capacity to assist in the development and enhancement of relationships between educators and students. These understandings led directly to the initial guiding research questions in my study.

The mask. In the dance, the mask is the representation of the being that is portrayed in the performance. It is also an artifact or physical representation of who we are in the context of our history: our nation, our clan, our crest. As my father explained, “the dancer makes the mask real” (Davidson, 2007, p. 11); however, the people who are witnessing the dance must also accept this reality. It is in this visual dialogue between the dancer and the witness that the being comes to life, and the dialogue begins with the mask. Here, the mask represents the way that I have been positioned by others in this work as well as how I have positioned myself, as I discussed earlier in this chapter.

Throughout this research, I have often been positioned by others in ways that directly connect to my Indigenous ancestry. However, as Jean-Paul Restoule (2000) advised, we must be careful with the assumptions that emerge from identifying solely with this singular aspect of ancestry, as it can easily be misrepresented or misunderstood. In his work with identifying, he challenged mainstream concepts of identity, explaining that “identity implies fixedness; that the ‘things’ that make one Indian remain the same and should be the same as those things associated with Indianness by the Europeans at the time of historical ‘first’ contact” (p. 103). He further proposed that these notions of an identity are problematic given that they are often defined by outsiders who hold the bar to measure and determine the factors connected to indigeneity (Restoule, 2000). Thomas King (2003) provided an example of outsiders determining Indigenous

identity in his description of Edward Curtis, a photographer who was hired to document Indigenous people across North America in the early 1900s:

Curtis was looking for the literary Indian, the dying Indian, the imaginative construct. And to make sure that he would find what he wanted to find, he took along boxes of ‘Indian’ paraphernalia – wigs, blankets, painted backdrops, clothing – in case he ran into Indians who did not look as the Indian was supposed to look. (p. 34)

This implies the Indigenous person who exists in the minds of many Euro-Canadians is not actually authentic, and this imaginative construct relies upon positioning and the use of artifacts derived from stereotypes to reinforce the inaccurate beliefs. A more recent example of the problems associated with others defining Indigenous identity can be found within the Canadian context where “much public discourse about Native people still deals in stereotypes. Our [Canadian] views of what constitutes an Indian today are as much bound up with myth, prejudice and ideology as earlier versions were” (Francis, 1992, p. 6). As Indigenous people we are both silenced and positioned by these discourses of Euro-Canadian society.

In 1884 the Potlatch Ban was introduced in an attempt to destroy authentic connections to our history and genuine expressions of our identities; nevertheless, we managed to find ways to reconnect with these after it was lifted in 1951. At that time, Haida people were allowed to sing and dance in public once more. Years later, in the hopes of strengthening our connection to our ancestral knowledge, my father decided to carve and raise a totem pole in his home community following a period of almost a century without a pole raising ceremony (Lederman, 2014). To prepare for the ceremony, my father had to visit and learn from Elders who pieced together memories of how the ceremony took place.

When my father started to prepare for the ceremony connected with the pole raising in 1969, the Elders began to gather to remember the songs and dances that had been lost over the years during the Potlatch Ban. My father recorded some of these gatherings, and I have heard the voices of these Elders as they worked together to collectively remember the songs and the dances that had been lost. My father told me that his naanii also taught him the dances that she remembered during these gatherings. To perform one of these dances, the q'aawhlaa¹¹, the dancer required a mask.

In the time before contact, when young Haida men would come of age, they would go into the forest to fast in order to find their spirit. When they returned, they were in a spirit state and required the help of a shaman to return to a human state. In the q'aawhlaa, the young man in the spirit state hides behind the blanket wearing a mask to represent this non-human state. He dances this way, revealing his spirit self momentarily for the first three verses of the song. Then for the final verse, the dancer removes his mask and exposes his true self (R. Davidson, personal communication, March 30, 2014). When my great-grandmother demonstrated the dance for my father, she was unable to express the spirit state without the use of a mask. To help with the transformation, she placed a paper bag over her head.

My father has often told this story of my great-grandmother teaching him this dance with a paper bag over her head. He has used it to illustrate the revival of Haida art from its previously dormant state during the Potlatch Ban – as a story of the transformation of the art form. He has also used it to explain the crucial role of the mask to transform the dancer into the being when a dance is performed.

Sometimes I wonder if my great-grandmother hid her face with the paper bag because of the residual shame that she was made to feel about her ancestral beliefs and practices. And

sometimes I wonder if my great-grandmother put on the paper bag to find the courage to pass on the dance. Always I am grateful that she was able to improvise using that paper bag so that the dance could continue to survive in her grandchildren and their grandchildren and all of the grandchildren who come after that.

Being positioned. My Haida ancestry was particularly relevant as I sought ethical approval from the UBC Behavioural Research Ethics Board and the Haida Education Council. However, because of my physical appearance and knowledge of my family connections to the Haida people, it was difficult to separate myself from being positioned as Indigenous. I was also positioned as an educator in this research. Despite the fact that I approached all of my interactions with the participants in this study as a researcher, my familiarity with the school district, the school, and the classroom came about as a result of my experiences as an educator. My comfort with the routines of the school and the classroom meant that it was also difficult to separate myself from being positioned as an educator.

Positioning myself. I resisted being identified solely as an Indigenous researcher. As mentioned previously, I am of mixed ancestry, so I worked very hard to bring in the perspectives of non-Indigenous participants and scholars. It was my intention to find a place that was truly representative of the strengths of Indigenous and non-Indigenous perspectives – and to authentically reflect my ancestry and worldview.

I worked to approach this study from the perspective of a researcher. This was one of the most challenging aspects of this study, but I felt that it was crucial in order to be able to gain the best insights into the participants and their worlds. Though I worked hard to remain in the role of a researcher, I am an educator first, so I struggled not to engage with the class as an educator. As a result, I made a list of rules for myself:

- Do not intervene with student conflicts unless there appears to be the possibility that one or more students will be harmed in any way.
- Do not engage in corrective behaviour with students who are swearing, discussing content that is inappropriate for school, off task, etc. unless the classroom teacher requests that I do so.
- Communicate clearly with the classroom teacher that I will happily assist students requiring support as long as the classroom teacher requests it and clarifies with the student that he or she is comfortable with receiving my assistance.
- Do not participate in classroom discussions unless I am invited to do so by a student or the classroom teacher.

The dance. The dance represents the ways in which a dancer interprets the merging of the song and the mask to bring the being to life. In the context of my research, it also represents the way that I exist in this work – my ability to improvise and negotiate my history, my experiences, and how I am positioned by others.

As Haida people, every dance that we perform is unique. Sometimes the dance is old and has been passed through generations of our ancestors. Sometimes the dance is new, based on fragments of memories embroidered with movements born out of intuition, observation, and improvisation. For example, as my father explained,

we now sing an old song called, ‘Eagle Spirit.’ The song is old, but we have created a new dance that expresses who we are today. The image and meaning of that dance is expressed through a red Eagle mask. The red symbolizes the love we have for ourselves. It symbolizes the strength we are gaining as a people and the strength we need to reclaim

our place in this world. (R. Davidson, personal communication [presentation], September 4, 2007)

The fact that some of the dances we perform have emerged from memories and new understandings of where we are today speaks to the adaptability of our culture and its capacity for change.

This idea that culture continues to adapt and change over time resonates with my father's belief that "The Haida people were always adapting. The culture was not fixed, as I had been led to believe by anthropologists. The culture was always evolving with the times" (Davidson & Steltzer, 1994, p. 101). It also connects to Jean-Paul Restoule's (2000) observation that "cultures are in a constant state of reinvention" (p. 104). In his article on identity, he suggested that if we replace notions of identity with identifying we can allow for this reinvention to occur, as it does not limit the positions that are available to us as Indigenous people. In his view, "identity often has to do with how the out-group culture views the in-group" (p. 104). In contrast, the notion of identifying means that

the power is placed in the self, for the Aboriginal person who emphasizes his or her Indigenous roots at a particular place and time. This allows for the salient components of an Aboriginal identity to be expressed as the actor feels is expedient, allowing for cultural change and adaptation. Identifying is situational and historical, whereas identity is thought to transcend history and social situations. (Restoule, 2000, p. 103)

The dance can also be considered in the context of Dorothy Holland and Jean Lave's (2009) notion of local contentious practice where "participants are historically related, partially united, partially divided, and surely always in conflict and tension through different political stances and relations of power" (p. 3). In the context of the space of local contentious practice,

the relationship between historical struggles in person and historically institutionalized struggles is complex and these histories come together repeatedly in struggle and are mediated through local contentious practices in each individual. Though notions of struggle imply less fluid expressions than those of the dance, here “struggle” is used to suggest “active engagement and avoids static notions of conflicts as stable or self-contained things in themselves” (Holland & Lave, 2000, p. 23). The dance is more fluid in its expression due to the dialogical nature of the interactions between history and the present which are always incomplete and unfinished (Holland & Lave, 2009). In Dorothy Holland and Jean Lave’s (2001) view, “struggles produce occasions on which participants are ‘addressed’ with great intensity and ‘answer’ intensely in their turn” (p. 10); that is to say, “we ‘author’ the world and ourselves in that world” (p. 10). Our ability to author ourselves and the world relies upon our ability to exist in the place where the mask and the song merge. It relies upon our ability to improvise and exist in struggle with our history, our experiences, how we are positioned, and how we position ourselves. This relationship can be illustrated by the song and the dance that are performed to signify the end of mourning ceremony for a person who has passed on. As my father described,

when my aunt and uncle died, we had a mourning ceremony for them. The idea came from the black Frog mask that my brother Reg had carved to end the mourning for the Edenshaw longhouse that burnt down. I made portrait masks of my aunt and uncle to bring them back from the spirit world, and it worked. People were stunned, they were magnetized by the images. It was eerie, as though they really had come back. The masks brought to mind incomplete ideas and thoughts about those people, and bringing them back one more time helped us to complete our life with them so that we could let them

go. People responded by saying that they hadn't seen that mourning ceremony for a long time. (Davidson & Steltzer, 1994, pp. 98-99)

After my great-grandmother died, I was asked to wear a portrait mask and do the end of mourning dance for her. I agreed, for I believed that to decline the request would be dishonourable and disrespectful to her memory. However, I was also very afraid because I was unsure how to dance for her. I had never done the dance before, and I had only seen it performed on a handful of occasions. My dancing was that of a vibrant young woman, and my great-grandmother was in her late 90s when she began her new journey. I did not know her dance. I had not thought to memorize her movements when she was alive. And yet when the drum began to beat, my limbs became heavy and my body felt tired. I moved slowly to the beat of the drum as I made my way onto the dance floor. My body was not my own, and the dance that I performed was unfamiliar to me. For those moments, I became the mask of my great-grandmother. I traveled around the perimeter of the floor slowly so that all of her family could wish her a light heart on her new journey.

As a researcher, I experience the conflicts between my identity as an educator, my identity as a woman of mixed Haida ancestry, my identity as a student, my identity as a community member, and my identity as an outsider. The conflict presents itself in the classroom, in the hallways of the school, in my interactions with students at the grocery store, at an event at the community hall – as I exist in these places with the participants. I struggle with which identities to allow to emerge and which ones to keep hidden. I bring this conflict into all aspects of my work, but my struggles teach me how to exist in this conflict.

I often think about my experience dancing for my great-grandmother. I have never been able to explain it, but now I understand it as a moment in my life when I allowed myself to exist at the intersection of the mask and the song.

Part II: Following the Teachings of *k'aad 'aww*



Figure 6. The Rainbow Creek Dancers performing *k'aad 'aww*. Photograph by Pardeep Singh. Used with permission.

Remembering how we learned

*As I walked on the beaches breathing in the ocean air,
as I ran down the highway drenched in the rain,
and as I sat at the kitchen table
looking out over the ripples in the water...*

*I became quiet,
and listened for the ways we used to learn.*

*And they returned to me
in the story of a dogfish mother
who was caught on the beach
and taught me how to respect my participants.*

*In the dance we performed to honour a chief
that allowed me to understand
a methodology and a dance
more deeply.*

*In the ancient song
that had been passed on
from our ancestors
to teach me
what had to be hidden to be kept safe*

*knowing that one day
it would be revived
once again.*

*And in that silence,
in the memory,
in that place,*

*I found a way to remember
how we learned.*



Figure 7. Looking for Metaphors in Mud Puddles.¹²

Chapter 3: Ethical Framework



Figure 8. The Rainbow Creek Dancers performing *k'aad 'aww*. Photograph by Pardeep Singh. Used with permission.

When we perform the shark dance, we go out onto the floor and we sway back and forth as the dogfish mother fights the currents above us. We are the foreground, and we complete the illusion of travelling through water. Our blankets are her body. When she leaves, we put on our masks and turn around in unison to begin our part of the dance. We separate into individual sharks and dance until the drum beat stops – but the song continues. We turn and then sway to the song as we make our way back off the floor. The drumbeat begins again.

*As I continued to work with this metaphor, I came to understand the difference between the story, as my father tells it, and the performance of the dance. The story represents the different aspects of the research, while the dance performance represents the process of engaging in the research. When I first began thinking about the performance of *k'aad 'aww*, I knew that the drumbeat was the methodology, and I thought that was what I was following in my research. Later, I remembered the drum's silence: we do not stop during the silence of the drum,*

we continue to dance. As I contemplated how the dance continued, I realized it is the song – not the drum beat – that we follow.

In that moment I understood the performance of the dance more deeply. As dancers, we were never intended to follow the drum as my uncle had explained so long ago; we were meant to follow the song. In the same way that the dancers follow the song, not the drum beat, I did not blindly follow the case study methodology in my research; rather, I followed my ethical framework and used it to guide me as I worked with the case study methodology. I realize then, that it is from the song or the ethical framework that everything else emerges – just as it did for the man on the beach so many years ago.

Relational Accountability

Shawn Wilson (2008) uses the term relational accountability to discuss the topic of ethics in research. I have also chosen to use this term as an overall descriptor for the complete ethical framework that I followed when I conducted this research, because at every stage it was crucial to me to ensure that I maintained respectful relationships. As required by the university, I sought permission from UBC's Behavioural Research Ethics Board and the school district where the research was conducted. Because I was working with students of Indigenous ancestry, I also sought the permission of the First Nation (Weaver, 1997) to conduct this research. For this community the role is fulfilled by the Haida Education Council, which was established "to develop a long-term sustained commitment to a partnership between the Haida Communities and the Education Community based on mutual respect and recognition, responsibility, and sharing" (Haida Education Council, n.d.). The Haida Education Council includes Haida representatives from the local bands, the Council of the Haida Nation, and the school district and "gives

Aboriginal peoples greater influence and control in determining school programs and services for our First Nation students” (Haida Education Council, n.d.).

According to Linda Tuhiwai Smith (2012),
from indigenous perspectives, ethical codes of conduct serve partly the same purpose as the protocols which govern our relationships with each other and with the environment. The term ‘respect’ is consistently used by indigenous peoples to underscore the significance of our relationships and humanity. Through respect the place of everyone and everything in the universe is kept in balance and harmony. Respect is reciprocal, shared, constantly interchanging principle which is expressed through all aspects of social conduct. (p. 125)

Because every aspect of this study was guided by the importance of maintaining strong and respectful relationships, I chose not to include a separate discussion of relationships as Amy Parent (2014) did in her work. Instead, I chose to adopt the perspective that the Indigenous storywork principles contribute to building relationships or developing relational accountability on the part of the researcher. For the purpose of ensuring that this foundational aspect of my research methodology is clearly communicated, I highlight the ways in which I used these Indigenous storywork principles of respect, responsibility, reverence, reciprocity, holism, interrelatedness, and synergy to guide my research practices and to enhance my relationships with the participants, the school district, and the community.

Respect

In her description of the Indigenous storywork methodology, Jo-ann Archibald (2008) explained that she began with “the principles of respect for cultural knowledge embedded in the stories and respect for the people who owned or shared stories as an ethical guide” (p. 36).

Though I was not working with traditional stories, I treated the stories that the participants shared with me with the same level of respect that I would use for a traditional story. I recognized that through their stories, the participants were sharing parts of themselves with me. Furthermore, when I was working with the participants, I treated them with the same level of respect as I would an Elder – regardless of their age.

In designing this study, I also incorporated some of the recommendations of Hillary Weaver (1997) for how to engage in respectful research relationships with Indigenous communities, including working with a community that is familiar with me and drawing upon my knowledge of our shared ancestry to ensure that I am respectful throughout both the research process and the dissemination of the findings. She also recommended that researchers have a knowledge of the culture of the community, self-awareness, and skills “in determining how to incorporate cultural components into a sound research design” (p. 5)

Responsibility

I recognize that responsibility plays a role at every stage of my research from my first conversation to the last word that I speak about it. I appreciated Jo-ann Archibald’s (2008) acknowledgement that she took “responsibility for any mistakes contained in [her] research because those who shared their knowledge with [her] did so with great care and often said that they spoke the truth as they knew it” (p. 24), and I used her acknowledgement as a reminder to remain attentive in my own work. As she later explained, “it is said that you cannot call your words back once they are uttered, and so you are responsible for all which results from your words” (p. 27). Shawn Wilson (2008) echoed this sentiment in the following explanation:

As a storyteller, I am responsible for who I share information with, as well as for ensuring that it is shared in an appropriate way, at the right place and time. In receiving

the story, you as an active listener are responsible for putting the story into a relational context that makes sense for you and for listening with an open heart and open mind. If you choose to pass along the story or my words, you also take on the responsibilities of the storyteller yourself. (pp. 126-127)

It is not explained in the story of the dogfish mother, as it has been passed on, how the man gained permission from the dogfish mother to learn her song and share it with others. However, in my own research, I have gained permission from the participants to share what they have taught me at multiple stages of the study. I recognize that I am sharing their knowledge in another context, that of the university, with which they may be unfamiliar. As a result, I have been very vigilant in my work to maintain the confidentiality of the participants in the study.

As I explained previously, due to my mixed ancestry, education, profession, and other factors, as well as the limitations of the terms, I am not considered an insider (Banks, 1998) in the context of this research. Nonetheless, because of my familial connections and ongoing visits to the community, I believe that Linda Tuhiwai Smith's (2012) observations about insiders conducting research in their home communities still apply to me. As she described, "insiders have to live with the consequences of their processes on a day-to-day basis for ever more, and so do their families and communities" (p. 138). She also explained that

insider research has to be as ethical and respectful, as reflexive and critical, as outsider research. It also needs to be humble. It needs to be humble because the researcher belongs to the community as a member with a different set of roles and relationships, status and position. (p. 140)

A final aspect of responsibility is ensuring that the stories we tell are authentic and reflect the perspectives of the participants in the study (Thomas, 2005) while being entwined with our own perspectives and understandings.

Ensuring authenticity. *In the story of the dogfish mother, the man has a responsibility to do his utmost to ensure that the song he memorizes and teaches others is accurately represented. When I am learning a new Haida song, I listen to it and then I practice it and then I sing it with my father. He will often correct me if I am singing it incorrectly. He will continue to practice with me and to correct me until I can sing it properly.*

In the example of the dogfish mother, there is no opportunity to check with her to make sure that the man has memorized her song correctly – though this would likely be the best way to accurately represent her song. In my study, I was able to check back with the participants to clarify what I understood and thus strengthen the authenticity of my work. In this process, “the actor is requested to examine rough drafts of writing where the actions or words of the actor are featured, sometimes when first written up but usually when no further data will be collected from him or her” (Stake, 1995, p. 115). Shawn Wilson (2008) also supported the use of this process in his assertion that, “...authenticity or credibility may be ensured...through continuous feedback with all the research participants. This allows each person in the research relationship to not only check the accuracy of the analysis but also to elaborate upon ideas” (p. 121). In my study, I returned my preliminary understandings to the students, though they did not respond. I also gave all of the participants in the study the opportunity to review the excerpts that I included from their interviews. If they chose, I sent the interview excerpts that I had included to them to ensure that they were comfortable with how their stories were represented. This was particularly important with the educators who participated, as some of the information they provided in the

interviews may have compromised their professional reputations if it was misunderstood. Lastly, I discussed the personal stories and reflections that included historical information with my father to ensure that the information was both accurate and permitted to be shared publicly. Occasionally, I had to rewrite or remove information in these stories at his request. Though I was not using storytelling as a methodology, I worked to adopt a similar stance where the participants hold the power and “the ‘researcher’ becomes the listener or facilitator” (Thomas, 2015, p. 245).

My commitment to ensuring the authenticity of the views that I shared in this research could be misinterpreted as a commitment to a single perspective that I was attempting to capture; this is not the case. I agree with Robert Stake’s (1995) suggestion that “...most qualitative researchers not only believe that there are multiple perspectives or views of [the case] that need to be represented, but that there is no way to establish, beyond contention, the best view” (p. 108). In this regard, he advocated for the presentation of these multiple perspectives for the reader to experience themselves. Despite his assertion that we cannot know the best perspective to share, he still maintained that “we have ethical obligations to minimize misrepresentation and misunderstandings” (pp. 108-109). Further, he provided a way to minimize them: “the qualitative researcher is interested in diversity of perception, even the multiple realities within which people live. Triangulation helps to identify these different realities” (2005, p. 454). He compared triangulation to navigating a ship and the necessity of using multiple stars to find our way. He completed this analogy with the observation that “our problem in case study is to establish meaning rather than location, but the approach is the same. We assume the meaning of an observation is one thing, but additional observations give us grounds for revising our interpretation” (Stake, 1995, p. 110). In this study, I worked to establish meaning using observations and interviews.

Reverence

In her work with the Elders, Jo-ann Archibald (2008) learned:

Storytellers showed reverence through prayer, songs, and the ethical ways that they approached the work with the curriculum staff. Prayer or song helps to create a meeting place for the heart, mind, body, and spirit to interact. Silence creates a respectful space for reverence. (p. 126)

Though Shawn Wilson (2008) worked in a different context, he made a similar observation:

Something that has become apparent to me is that for Indigenous people, research is a ceremony. In our cultures an integral part of any ceremony is setting the stage properly. When ceremonies take place, everyone who is participating needs to be ready to step beyond the everyday and to accept a raised state of consciousness. You could say that the specific rituals that make up the ceremony are designed to get the participants into a state of mind that will allow for the extraordinary to take place [emphasis in original]. (p. 69)

Though there were no direct conversations about spirituality, prayer, or ceremony in my study, I brought aspects of reverence to the study with the way in which I interacted with the participants. I ensured that I respected their requests and that I honoured their stories and their confidences. As I wrote this dissertation, I continued to hold the highest regard for the people with whom I had worked and did my utmost to ensure that their stories were treated with the reverence that they deserved.

This coming fall, my father will be hosting a *gyaa 'isdla*¹³ where I will be giving my research back to the community. I am introducing this new research tradition to honour the contributions of the participants and to publicly acknowledge that I do not own this research. I

also view this act as an extension of Shawn Wilson's (2008) recognition that research is ceremony.

Reciprocity

In her work with Indigenous storywork, Jo-ann Archibald (2008) emphasized the importance of giving back to the people with whom she was working. This principle of reciprocity, though it was rarely explicitly discussed in her book, was ever present in all of her interactions with Elders and community members. She explained that one aspect of reciprocity is “sharing this learning with others” (p. 48). Of all of the principles, the commitment to reciprocity was one of the most important for me in my own work. The principle of reciprocity closely connects to the notion of contribution – the importance of which was a significant part of my upbringing. Contribution also emerged as a theme in work that I did with my father learning about traditional Haida pedagogical practices (Davidson & Davidson, 2016). Throughout this research, I engaged in reciprocity and made contributions to the community as a researcher, an educator, a facilitator, a presenter, and a community member.

As a researcher. In designing this study, I aligned my questions with both the Aboriginal Education Enhancement Agreement (School District 55 (Pacific Sound¹⁴), 2012a) and the Achievement Contract (School District 55 (Pacific Sound), 2012b) to ensure that the findings would be useful and relevant to the school district that hosted me. I also committed to sharing the findings with all interested parties, particularly those who were most impacted by the study. Before leaving Haida Gwaii, I attended a meeting to share my findings with the Haida Education Council. The presentation was very well-received, and one of the school board trustees expressed appreciation and enthusiasm about using the ethical framework that I shared in the policy

development for reviewing research proposals for both the school district and local health organizations.

The findings from this study may contribute to improving education for Indigenous and non-Indigenous students who are struggling with print literacy. I also believe that the students in the study may have benefited from the conversations that we had about literacy. As Darryl Bazylak (2002) observed in his study with Indigenous adolescents, it was tremendously beneficial for the students to have the experience of being heard. By participating in this study, I believe the students may have experienced those same benefits and perhaps gained further insights into themselves.

Upon my departure, I donated a class set of novels to the school; these were selected by the principal. I recognize that it may have been more appropriate to share compensation with the individual students who participated in the interviews; however, I was concerned that this might coerce students into participating when they did not wish to do so. Because I was not providing individual compensation to the students, I did not provide individual compensation to the adults who participated in the study.

As an educator. As a certified teacher with nearly 10 years of classroom experience, I was able to share ideas with newer educators if it was requested. While I was in the classroom, there were substitute teachers who also covered classes when I was observing, and it was not unusual for them to engage in conversations with me about ways to improve their teaching practices. I would happily have those conversations. I also shared my course units and lesson plans with the two classroom teachers, as neither of them had taught the course prior to that year. I met regularly with the new teacher to discuss planning, classroom management, and assessment strategies – though I was never directly involved with actual student assessment. I also

communicated regularly with the Superintendent of Schools and the District Principal of Aboriginal Education to ensure that they knew that I was available to help in the district any way that I could.

As a facilitator. While I was doing my research, I was also a teaching assistant for a UBC MOOC (Massive Open Online Course) entitled Reconciliation through Indigenous Education. Because there was an interest at the district administrative level to support educators and other school district employees to complete the course, I worked with the District Principal of Aboriginal Education to facilitate a weekly MOOC working group for school district employees.

Following the first six-week course, the group expressed a continued interest in working with the topics. As a result, I worked with the District Principal of Aboriginal Education to develop and host a series of Tea and Talks. These drop-in sessions were held in communities throughout the district and were open to everyone. They consisted of a presentation by a guest speaker followed by a group discussion period and focused on a range of topics relevant to Indigenous education. The following September, the course was offered again, and I continued my work facilitating a second weekly MOOC working group.

As a presenter. For one of my comprehensive exams, I worked with my father to learn more about traditional Haida pedagogical practices. I wrote a paper about what I had learned and from that, I developed a presentation. The District Principal of Aboriginal Education expressed an interest in sharing that presentation with people from the district. At her request, I shared this presentation at one of the Tea and Talks, a Principals meeting, a new teacher orientation, a district math meeting, and a Haida Education Council meeting. We also discussed the possibility

of developing the principles from that presentation into a poster that would be available for educators in the district.

As a community member. At the request of the organizers for the Early Learning Forum held in the school district, I opened the day by singing traditional Haida songs. Later, I also performed with our Haida dance group at a Haida chieftainship potlatch on the islands.

I share these examples here to demonstrate how reciprocity can look in the context of research. Though I know that this was not a requirement for my research, it was an important aspect of my participation in the community. I believe that it influenced my study because it gave the participants and the community the sense that I was not only there to take but also to give.

Holism

According to Jo-ann Archibald (2008),

An Indigenous philosophical concept of holism refers to the interrelatedness between the intellectual, spiritual (metaphysical values and beliefs and the Creator), emotional, and physical (body and behaviour/action) realms to form a whole healthy person. The development of holism extends to and is mutually influenced by one's family, community, band, and nation. (p. 11)

Dwayne Donald (2009) also contended that “we must look at the world holistically and search for regular observable patterns in nature as a way to make sense of the world and our place in it” (p. 13). Though he is referring to a connection with nature, I believe that this connection extends to understanding the wider environment people inhabit in order to understand more about them. In his work with case study, Robert Stake (1995) emphasized the importance of the context of the case. Part of understanding this context can be achieved through communication with those

around the people included in the case; therefore, I talked to others who were familiar with and/or supported the students in the study. This allowed me to gain a more holistic perspective and insights on the students and their literacy experiences.

My commitment to understanding the context by talking to others outside the case was emphasized when I was working through my research proposal for UBC's Behavioural Research Ethics Board approval process. When I had to complete the section that described who would be excluded from my study, I realized very clearly that I did not want to exclude anyone. I believed that if anyone wanted to contribute, I would find a way to honour their contribution. I am grateful that I made that decision, as some unexpected individuals came forward to share with me, and each person provided valuable information with regard to the students in the case study. Listening to the stories of the people who surrounded the students in the case allowed me to understand the students in a more holistic way and provided much of the information about the context of the study. Because I had adopted a more holistic perspective early on in the research, I was better able to anticipate and respond to these contributions.

Interrelatedness

While I was working with the students, particularly during the interviews, I understood that the participants were telling me a story and I was the listener. In doing so, I recognized the truth in Jo-ann Archibald's (2008) observation that "an interrelationship between the story, storytelling, and listener is another critical principle of storywork" (p. 32). I was incredibly aware of the connection between how the students were telling the story and what lessons I was learning from them. This interrelatedness continued as I worked to transcribe the interviews and new understandings emerged. As I sat with the stories longer, I became increasingly aware of how my own life and experiences shaped my understandings of their stories. The sense of

interrelatedness contributed to the reverence and appreciation I had for the participants and their willingness to teach me with their stories.

This notion of interrelatedness continued as I endeavoured to clearly articulate my understandings for the readers of this work. Robert Stake (2005) also explored the significance of this connection that occurs between the researcher and the reader in his emphasis on the importance of providing vivid descriptions or naturalistic generalizations in our writing that can allow for this to occur.

Experiential descriptions and assertions are relatively easily assimilated by readers into memory and use. When the researcher's narrative provides opportunity for *vicarious experience*, readers extend their perceptions of happenings. Naturalistic, ethnographic case materials, at least to some extent, parallel actual experience, feeding into most fundamental processes of awareness and understanding [emphasis in the original]. (p. 454)

It is therefore important in my work to provide sufficient contextual information in my dissertation, so the reader can “make some generalizations entirely from personal or vicarious experience. Enduring meanings come from encounter, and they are modified and reinforced by repeated encounter” (Stake, 2005, p. 454).

Synergy

Jo-ann Archibald's (2008) final Indigenous storywork principle is synergy. As she explained,

...the power created during the storytelling session seemed interrelational as it moved among the storyteller and the story listeners in the storytelling situation. This interaction

created a synergistic story power that had emotional, healing, and spiritual aspects. The synergistic story power also brought the story ‘to life.’ (p. 100)

Initially, I struggled to understand how synergy impacted my own study until I began working with the story of the dogfish mother to understand the role of my ethical framework in my research decisions. Later, after reflecting upon the experience, I was excited to learn that my understanding of the shark dance had been enhanced through my work with the metaphor. Furthermore, my understanding of the importance of my ethical framework became clearer as a result of working with the metaphor. I was amazed that the story had been able to contribute so much to my understanding of the case study methodology after years of working with textbooks and trying to make sense of it in more conventional ways. I have come to believe that this is the power of synergy in my work, and I view it as an example of the synergistic connections between the story and my life experience (Archibald, 2008), which is also evident in the analysis of my data (see Chapter 5 for a more detailed description).

The Use of the Indigenous Storywork Principles in this Study

The use of the Indigenous storywork principles provided a solid foundation for my research. By operationalizing them here, I was able to provide examples of ways to take them up as guidelines for conducting ethical research with Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities. The conversations that I had at the Haida Education Council meeting demonstrated for me the promise of using these principles to guide policy for future research in education and health on Haida Gwaii. I modeled respectful research practices – particularly those that made contributions to the lives of the residents of Haida Gwaii – in the hopes that future research partnerships will be held to a high standard before being considered.

Chapter 4: The Teachings of the Dogfish Mother (Methodology)



Figure 9. The Rainbow Creek Dancers performing *k'aad 'aww*. Photograph by Pardeep Singh. Used with permission.

Before I began this study, I did not intend to follow an Indigenous methodology. I was committed to case study, and I did not see any reason to push it aside, nor did I understand that it could be strengthened by using an Indigenous ethical framework. During my doctoral coursework, I took courses in Indigenous methodologies because I thought I would have to defend why I, as an Indigenous researcher, did not use an Indigenous methodology.

I now understand that my reluctance to embrace an Indigenous framework was a remnant of my fear that my work would not be viewed as scholarly or academic enough if it was guided by the knowledge of my ancestors. I believed that if I could once again deny my indigeneity, I would be taken seriously as a knowledgeable individual. At the time, I did not realize what I was trying to do. I did not realize how deeply my Indigenous upbringing was rooted, nor did I imagine it could overpower my attempts to suppress it. Not long after that, I quietly confessed to my partner, “I think that I am more Indigenous than I thought I was...”

The Beat of the Drum (Rationale for the Methodology)

According to Robert Stake (1988), “the case study is a study of a ‘bounded system,’ emphasizing the unity and wholeness of that system, but confining the attention to those aspects that are relevant to the research problem at the same time” (p. 258). In this instrumental case study (Stake, 2005), I have examined a particular case in order to “provide insight into an issue” (p. 445). In instrumental cases,

the case is of secondary interest, it plays a supportive role, and it facilitates our understanding of something else. The case still is looked at in depth, its contexts scrutinized and its ordinary activities detailed, but all because this helps us pursue the external interest. (Stake, 2005, p. 445)

Although there is very little research in the area of Indigenous adolescent literacy (Belgarde, Loré, and Meyer, 2009), two studies examine the topic (Noll, 1998; Wilson and Boatwright, 2011), and both of these drew upon case study methodology. However, neither of these case studies was conducted by researchers of Indigenous ancestry.

From the beginning, it has been clear to me that the drumbeat is the methodology. It is steady and provides a solid structure for my qualitative case study (Stake, 1995). I used this methodology to guide my research into how students in an English 10 First Peoples class in rural British Columbia used identity texts to engage with the writing process and how the use of narrative writing affected their writing ability. I also examined the use of narrative writing to explore students’ identities, including how students’ identities influence their experiences of school. Furthermore, throughout this research, I learned about the process, challenges, and successes of mandating Indigenous content in a mainstream secondary school.

Robert Stake's (1995) approach to case study incorporates a responsive aspect to the methodology. Over the years, the shark dance has evolved and changed (see Chapter 5 for a more detailed description). This capacity for our cultural expressions to adapt reminds me of a conversation I had with my father about how the Haida adapted to the new economy. He felt that our capacity to innovate contributed to our success (R. Davidson, personal communication [interview], July 11, 2014). It is perhaps the allowance for innovation and change that has drawn me to Robert Stake's (1995) understanding of case study methodology. In his view, we need to respond to the findings of our study, which means that our questions may shift through the course of our research. I consider this responsive nature a strength, for when I began, I had no idea where I might end up.

Though I appreciate the work of Robert Stake, I struggle with his statement that "ultimately, the interpretations of the researcher are likely to be emphasized more than the interpretations of those people studied, but the qualitative case researcher tries to preserve the multiple realities, the different and even contradictory views of what is happening" (Stake, 1995, p. 12). I do not believe that this demonstrates the level of commitment required to honour and share the perspectives of our participants. For me, it is important that the participants have the final say; that is, I recognize that I must represent their words as accurately as possible. This focus on ensuring the participants' voices are heard reinforces my previous recognition that it is the song, not the drum, that we follow in the dance. The song, in this case, refers to my ethical framework which is guided by the Indigenous storywork principles (Archibald, 2008).

By viewing the case study methodology through the lens of Indigenous storywork principles, I believe I have addressed Shawn Wilson's (2008) concern that we not attempt to adjust mainstream methodologies to suit our needs. As he explained,

we have tried to adapt dominant system research tools by including our perspective into their views. We have tried to include our cultures, traditional protocols and practices into the research processes through adapting and adopting tools from their underlying beliefs. Since these beliefs are not always compatible with our own, we will always face problems in trying to adapt dominant system tools to our use. (p. 13)

Though these tools may be considered problematic, Linda Tuhiwai Smith (2012) affirmed that we do not need to totally reject “all theory or research or Western knowledge. Rather, it is about centring our concerns and world views and then coming to know and understand theory and research from our own perspectives and for our own purposes” (p. 41). In this study, I did not use Robert Stake’s (1995) work on case study to validate Indigenous methodologies; instead, I am so deeply rooted in my own ethical practice, which aligns with Indigenous perspectives, that it has guided how I have taken up Robert Stake’s ideas.

The Place Where the Ocean Meets the Shore (Research Context¹⁵)

In the story of the dogfish mother, the man finds her on the beach. She has been left there by the outgoing tide. She is in the “last throes of life” because she cannot breathe the air; the water is her home. This image brings to mind the two main contexts of this research: the classroom and school where the research took place and the larger context of academia where I learned to conduct research and where I must present my research when I have finished. I recognize that much like the air is unfamiliar to the dogfish mother, the world of academia is unfamiliar to many of my participants. In the same way that the man had to protect the dogfish mother while he learned her song, I recognize that I too must care for the participants in the study while I learn from them and when I share their stories.

The community¹⁶. This study took place in a rural, isolated community in northern British Columbia. There are approximately 1000 residents in the community where the school is located and an additional 800 residents living on the nearby Indian reserve. Some students are also bussed in from two outlying communities with populations of approximately 200 and 400 residents. There is one secondary school to serve these four communities.

The school. During the time of the study, the school had 135 students enrolled in grades eight to twelve. Approximately 63% of the students at the school self-identified as being of Aboriginal¹⁷ ancestry (Ministry of Education, British Columbia, 2015b). This is a unique setting in that the majority of the Aboriginal students in the school and in the district are of Haida ancestry.

The classroom. In 2011, the secondary school where I conducted my research made the decision to make English 10 First Peoples the only language arts course available for grade 10 students. This meant that in order to graduate, it was mandatory¹⁸ for students to enrol in the course. In this school, English First Peoples was only offered in grade 10; for other grades, the language arts requirements were met with English 8, 9, 11, and 12. To my knowledge, at the time of the study, this was the only school in British Columbia where enrolment in English 10 First Peoples was required¹⁹.

The university. Though I did not collect data at the university, I have included this as part of the context of the study, as it was where the study began and where it will return. It is where the words and stories of the participants will finally reside. I have had to hold this context in my mind throughout the entire study to ensure that I protect the participants from this environment with which they may not be familiar. I have meticulously reviewed their

contributions to ensure that they have not left themselves vulnerable and that I have not compromised them in some way.

The Dogfish Mother (Research Sample)

In my interpretation of the story of k'aad 'aww, the dogfish mother represents the case or group of students in the study. Just as the man is trying to learn the song of the dogfish mother before returning her to the ocean, I too am trying to learn as much as I can from these participants before I release them back into their own worlds. Although the man on the beach had no control over which dogfish mother he learned from, I was compelled to find a group of people from whom I felt I could learn the most.

According to Robert Stake (2005) there are specific tasks involved in selecting a case:

The researcher examines various interests in the phenomenon, selecting a case of some typicality but leaning toward those cases that seem to offer *opportunity to learn*. My choice would be to choose that case from which we feel we can learn the most. That may mean taking the one most accessible or the one we can spend the most time with.

Potential for learning is a different and sometimes superior criterion to representativeness. Sometimes it is better to learn a lot from an atypical case than a little from a seemingly typical case [emphasis in the original]. (p. 451)

Sharan Merriam (1998) described this process as purposeful sampling which is “based on the assumption that the investigator wants to discover, understand, and gain insight and therefore must select a sample from which the most can be learned” (p. 61). She explained that “to begin purposive [also known as purposeful] sampling, you must first determine what selection *criteria* are essential in choosing the people or sites to be studied [emphasis in the original]” (p. 61) and

added that a set of criteria should “directly reflect the purpose of the student and guide in the identification of information-rich cases” (pp. 61-62).

The first level of sampling was based largely upon my shared ancestry with many of the students in this school district and my experiences living and working in communities located in this school district. Because of this, it seemed to be the most appropriate place for me to conduct my research. I also selected this district because of the ongoing financial support I have received from my Indian band to pursue postsecondary studies and my desire to give back my community. As a secondary teacher, I have taught English 10 First Peoples, so I was familiar with the learning outcomes and how they would lend themselves to the research that I wished to conduct. I also felt that my particular interest in the Indigenous context would align more readily with the outcomes of this course. In this district, at the time of the study, English 10 First Peoples was only offered in one school; this determined that I would conduct my research in that school. The fact that the course was mandated, was of particular interest to me. For all of these reasons, I selected this particular grade 10 cohort of students. The class consisted of 26 students and about 18 students attended class regularly. In this cohort of students, 16 of the 26 students self-identified as being of Aboriginal ancestry (Ministry of Education, British Columbia, 2015b).

Though the first level of sampling resulted in a very unique sample (Merriam, 1998), the second level of sampling or the sampling within the case was based upon convenience sampling. This level of sampling was determined by parental permission and a willingness on the part of the student to be involved. Students were not excluded from this study based upon their ancestry, as I believe that all students had the potential to make important contributions. However, I was especially interested in ensuring that students of Indigenous ancestry who were struggling academically and/or were at risk for dropping out of school were included in this study. As a

classroom teacher and as a researcher, I was particularly interested in learning more about how to support this vulnerable group of students, unfortunately I was not able to speak to them in-depth directly.

I knew some of the students I wanted to talk to from the moment I walked into the classroom. I could see them on the fringes of the classroom completely disengaged from the topic or the lesson of the day. They were more interested in watching YouTube on their iPhones or sharing selfies on Snapchat. They talked to me and even told me about how they passed the time in class instead of doing coursework. I managed to get the titles of books that they liked to read, but none of them seemed to want to talk to me in a small room with a recorder. They never said this directly to me, but they never approached me to arrange an interview. Not one of them brought in a completed permission form.

I was bound by the research proposal that I had sent to UBC's Behavioural Research Ethics Board – the one where I said that I would not approach a student and directly ask them to participate in the study. I wrote that because I recognized the power, as an adult, that I hold in a classroom of teenagers. I did not want to give myself permission to engage in what could be considered coercion. And yet, I recognized that this decision not to approach people went against a cultural protocol, the one where it was my responsibility to invite people to talk to me. One of these students really wanted to talk to me, but based on what was going on at home, he did not feel that he could get a signature from a parent.

In the end, I talked to these students in the class and wrote reflections about what I learned in ways that obscured their identities completely. I corroborated these reflections with the answers to questions that I asked the educators and the student participants about those who

had not come forward to be interviewed. But I knew that something was lost, that the truth in their words was obscured in a way that rendered them completely unrecognizable.

Collecting the Dogfish Mother's Song (Data Sources)

In this study, I worked with the classroom teacher to create an instructional unit to support student exploration of their own identities. The unit included biographies, memoirs, essays, fiction short stories, poetry, and films selected around the theme of identity. Assessment for this unit was a narrative essay that explored an aspect of the student's identity. I worked with the classroom teacher to develop an appropriate timeline and some instructional ideas for this unit. The data sources for this study included participant observations and interviews.

Participant observations. I began observations as soon as I started attending the class. My intention was to use these observations to determine the level of engagement the students had with any given activity and to help me become familiar with the routines and practices of the class. I also worked to “establish a rapport by fitting into the participants’ routines, finding some common ground with them, helping out on occasion, being friendly, and showing interest in the activity” (Merriam, 1998, p. 99). This engagement was particularly important at the beginning prior to the interviews because, as Shawn Wilson (2008) explained, “the relationship building that this sharing and participating entailed is an important aspect of ethical Indigenous research” (p. 40). Because the school operated on a linear system, classes were two to three times per week, and I attended regularly for the duration of the study to observe and take field notes. In my field notes, I included the following elements: the physical setting, the participants, the activities and interactions, the conversations, the subtle factors (e.g., informal or unplanned activities, nonverbal communication, omissions), and my own behaviour (Merriam, 1998). This detailed note-taking was important to ensure that it was possible “to provide a relatively incontestable

description for further analysis and ultimate reporting” (Stake, 1995, p. 62). However, Robert Stake (1995) also suggested that researchers

favor a personal capture of the experience so, from their own involvement, they can interpret it, recognize its contents, puzzle the many meanings while still there, and pass along an experiential, naturalistic account for readers to participate themselves in some similar reflection. (p. 44)

For these observations, I adopted the participant as observer perspective where “the researcher’s observer activities, which are known to the group, are subordinate to the researcher’s role as a participant” (Merriam, 1998, p. 101). As an educator, my primary concern is for student welfare, and so it was not possible to remain uninvolved if a student solicited assistance or my involvement in ways that did not interfere with their learning. Shawn Wilson (2008) supported the use of participant observation as an aspect of traditional Indigenous research which “emphasizes learning by watching and doing” (p. 40). Furthermore, he explained that

participant observation is a term used for this watching and doing in a scientific manner. The aim of this strategy is to gain a closeness or familiarity with a group, through taking part in their day-to-day activities over a long period of time. While engaging with the group, the researcher is simultaneously observing their behaviour and analyzing why they are doing things in their way. (p. 40)

I was in the classroom for four months; this provided me with ample time to develop some connections with the students. Eventually they seemed to forget about my presence which provided me with more opportunities to observe them.

Interviews. According to Arthur Frank (2010),

research is no one-way transmission of information about lives; rather, it is an ongoing dialogue between participants' meanings; the meanings that the researchers attribute to their words, their actions, their lives, and their stories; and how participants change in response to researchers' responses. (p. 99)

Interviews were a particularly significant aspect of this study, as much of what I was trying to learn about was not taking place during the time that I was making observations in the classroom. In order to engage in dialogue, I conducted interviews with the students, their teachers, their administrators, a family member, and community members. According to Robert Stake (2005), "what details of life the researchers are unable to see for themselves is obtained by *interviewing people who did see them* or by finding documents recording them [emphasis added]" (p. 453). Sharan Merriam (1998) agreed that "interviewing is necessary when we cannot observe behavior, feelings, or how people interpret the world" (p. 72); in this study I was particularly interested in people's interpretations of their worlds and attempting to build relationships with the participants. Shawn Wilson (2008) supported the capacity to develop relationships through interviews in his contention that

when you're relating a personal narrative, then you're getting into a relationship with someone. You're telling their side of the story and then you're analyzing it. So you're looking at the relationship that develops between the person telling the story and the person analyzing the story; it becomes a strong relationship. (p. 115)

The format for the interviews was adapted from Elizabeth Noll's (1998) research (see below for more details about her interview process). Each interview was audio-recorded and then transcribed. I also completed reflective notes following the interviews and during the transcription process. I transcribed each interview myself and used it as an opportunity to begin

the recursive process of data analysis (Merriam, 1998). The process of transcription also helped me to improve the quality of later interviews.

Students. Following the lead of Amy Wilson and Michael Boatright (2011) and Elizabeth Noll (1998), I attempted to conduct in-depth phenomenological interviews (see Appendix A) with the four student participants. In the interview excerpts, the students are identified as students with pseudonyms that they selected to provide confidentiality. According to Irving Seidman (2013), “at the root of in-depth interviewing is an interest in understanding the lived experience of other people and the meaning they make of that experience” (p. 9). He suggested the process should include a series of three separate interviews:

The first interview establishes the context of the participants’ experience. The second allows participants to reconstruct the details of their experience within the context in which it occurs. And the third encourages the participants to reflect on the meaning of their experience. (Seidman, 1998, p. 11)

In my research, the interviews focused upon the student participants’ history and experiences with literacy and specifically writing. In her study, Elizabeth Noll (1998) also conducted an additional fourth interview to confirm or disconfirm any initial findings. Robert Stake (1995) suggested that member checks can be useful for this purpose.

I intended to conduct the fourth and final interviews with the students. However, we reached the end of the year. Students were focused on exams and the upcoming summer holiday. Instead of attempting to schedule another interview, I prepared a brief summary of my findings for each student to review. I asked them to contact me if they had any changes or clarifications, but I was never contacted.

Family and/or community members. I conducted semi-structured interviews (Merriam, 1998) with one student’s parent and two community members (see Appendices C and D). These assisted me in understanding what writing practices took place at home and how others perceived writing inside and outside school. In the interview excerpts, these family and community members are identified as community members with pseudonyms that they selected to provide additional confidentiality.

Teachers. I conducted semi-structured interviews (Merriam, 1998) with three teachers to extend some of the information provided by the students, gain insight into some of the participant observations, and better understand the teachers’ perceptions of the students’ and class’s engagement and performance in writing (see Appendix B). In the interview excerpts, these teachers are identified as educators with pseudonyms that they selected to provide additional confidentiality.

Administrators. I conducted semi-structured (Merriam, 1998) interviews with three administrators to gain additional insight into the school policies and curriculum decisions, particularly the decision to make English 10 First Peoples mandatory (see Appendix B). In the interview excerpts, these administrators are identified as educators with pseudonyms that they selected to provide additional confidentiality.

Written narratives. As I described in Chapter 2, while I was teaching I observed the powerful impact of sharing written stories in the journals with my students. In her chapter on “Culturally Relevant Story Making from an Indigenous Perspective,” Maenette Benham (2007) drew on the work of Mikhail Bakhtin to speak of the “power of narrative to open up a space for voice, where power, authority, and representation can be heard, in particular the voice and voices of those most vulnerable, those most often not heard” (p. 519). Her work supports my use of

narrative writing particularly with Indigenous students. She also suggested that “because the narrative offers a relational and cultural site for learning, it becomes a powerful tool. That is, identity formation, problem solving, intellectual inquiry, and skill acquisition can be defined by the messages embedded in the narrative” (p. 517). I observed the capacity of writing stories to provide a space for identity exploration as well as their potential to foster and strengthen relationships between students and teachers in my own classroom and in this study (see Chapters 8 and 11 for a more detailed discussion).

The form of narrative writing lends itself far more easily than expository writing to storytelling, which is an integral part of knowledge transmission in Indigenous cultures (Archibald, 2008; Thomas, 2005). Furthermore, it is flexible enough to accommodate the differing plot structures that accompany these more traditional stories. In Maenette Benham’s (2007) view, “Indigenization of the narrative is an important responsibility of native/indigenous scholars because there is a sacredness that connects the telling and retelling to the traditional wisdom and lifeways of a native community” (p. 521). I am not suggesting that narrative writing should replace expository writing, but rather that we should consider the sequence in which we engage in writing instruction, beginning with the narrative and then moving to expository writing.

In this study, the written narratives were created throughout the two month-long identity unit and were focused upon experiences the students had in their lives that related to aspects of their identity. The narratives were completed as assignments for the course, so all students were expected to complete them; however, only those students wishing to participate in this part of the study were invited to submit theirs for further analysis. I had hoped that these selected students

would submit at least two written narratives: one from early on in the unit and the other from the end of the unit.

In a presentation to the class and in the individual interviews, I invited each of the students to share their narratives with me. The students who participated in the interviews all agreed that they would share their entire narrative essays for my research, but none of them sent a narrative essay to me. I later sent another request to each of the students who had already agreed to share a narrative, but none of them responded. Therefore, the only way that I was able to learn about the written narratives was through the student and teacher interviews.

Identity texts. Identity texts are

the products of students' creative work or performances carried out within the pedagogical space orchestrated by the classroom teacher. Students invest their identities in the creation of these texts – which can be written, spoken, signed, visual, musical, dramatic, or combinations in multimodal form. The identity text then holds a mirror up to students in which their identities are reflected back in a positive light. (Cummins & Early, 2011, p. 3)

Though identity texts have been used previously with students from multilingual schools, I was interested in their potential capacity to enable marginalized students to develop 'identities of competence' (Cummins & Early, 2011). Furthermore, the use of identity texts adds a different mode to represent identity in schooling. As Peter Smagorinsky (as cited in Zoss, 2009) noted, "in translating their thoughts into a material product, learners often develop new ideas about the object of their thinking." He went on to describe that the student's creation "becomes a symbol that the student can use to promote further reflection (and often reconsideration) of the ideas that produced it" (p. 187). In addition, the identity texts were intended to allow for an additional

perspective on the role of the students' identities in their schooling experiences, as the "images evoke deeper elements of human consciousness that [sic] do words" (Harper, 2002, p. 13). As Luis Urrieta Jr. (2007) explained, "people 'figure' who they are through the activities and in relation to the social types that populate these figured worlds and in social relationships with the people who perform these worlds. People develop new identities in figured worlds" (p. 108).

Through the creation of identity texts, I believed it would be possible to explore and create figured worlds where students could consider different ways to make sense of their experiences (Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner, & Cain, 1998). These identity texts were intended to be used as a tool to assist students in beginning their narrative writing as well as to provide a means to communicate the function of identities in their schooling experiences. It should be noted that the students were allowed to decide what parts of the identity texts they wanted to share and the person with whom they shared them.

The students were relieved to find out that they did not need to share their identity text with the whole class. Instead, every student was allowed to choose someone in the class with whom they could share their identity text. Only one student asked the teacher to opt out. However, he did feel comfortable sharing the identity text with the teacher, so he was able to be accommodated.

Once again, the students were invited to share their identity texts with me, but they chose not to do so. I managed to see some of the texts that they created, but the data for these came from the interviews.

Learning from the Dogfish Mother (Data Collection)

When the dogfish mother is on the beach in the last throes of life, the man listens to her chant. He memorizes it. He is learning from her. The chant is hers, but he memorizes it to share

with others, so that they too can learn from her. In order to learn her chant, he must understand that her chant is different from his own. He must be open to the nuances that may be unfamiliar to him. If there were more dogfish mothers to learn from, he would need to understand that each chant is unique and worthy of being shared.

Stages of the study. When I initially thought about this study, I imagined it taking place in multiple stages, and I would move from one stage to the next almost seamlessly, each stage building upon the previous one. In my proposal, I outlined these four neat stages and described what would happen during each. However, as I continue to discover, research is neither linear nor simple. Furthermore, because I was working with human beings, the priority was to ensure that I maintained respectful relationships. To do this, I had to follow the song; this meant that I had to deviate from the path that I had set out for myself, and at times I had to improvise to ensure that I honoured my ethical framework.

Stage zero. There was no stage zero in the plan that I initially set out for myself, although, as I look back upon my data collection, I know that the research process began long before the first stage that I had outlined. It began the day I walked into the classroom at the end of January. I introduced myself to the class and explained a bit about what I was doing.

I try to present myself as a researcher, but I am uncertain how to walk into a classroom and not be an educator. I do not know how to stand at the front of the class and not try to manage it. The students are talking, and I do not know how to stop using my teacher voice to speak to them and still ensure that they hear what I am saying.

For two and a half months, I sit at the back of the class knitting and watching the students and taking notes. Occasionally the students ask me about what I have written down or whether I can share personal details that I learn from these observations with others. I assure

them I can not. The students are curious about me and my research when I first arrive in their class, but as time goes on I became a fixture.

I believe that this time spent waiting for the new teacher to arrive means that I miss my window of curiosity. In mid-February, the new teacher arrives. I talk about my research with them, and their enthusiasm for my work is reassuring. We sit together in the back of the classroom before they take over the class, and we meet regularly after school to discuss the unit they will be teaching that will include some of the areas of interest in my research. However, they do not actually take over the class until early March, so for nearly a month the two of us sit together at the back of the class observing.

It takes far longer than I anticipate to begin the unit of study. With the overall research timeline in mind, I decide that as soon as I am sure that the new teacher is comfortable with the direction of the research, I need to begin interviewing participants, even though I had intended to begin this in stage three.

I place posters around the community advertising for the information session and also to invite community members, who may be interested, to participate in the study. Just before March Break, two community members approach me to be involved. I interview them prior to the break. A student also approaches me to schedule an interview after March Break.

Stage one. In the first stage of this study, I planned to share my own identity text (Davidson, 2014), which consists of images, spoken narrative, and music, and is based upon my experiences as an Indigenous educator and postsecondary student.

After March Break, I share my identity text with the students. As soon as I am in front of the class, I switch to educator mode. I want the students to pay attention to the example, as I know it will be hard for them to work with images and metaphor – at least I believe I know this,

based on my classroom experiences. Students who have previously been uninterested in completing assignments or teacher instruction are engaged for a moment. I wonder if it is because I am sharing something of significance to me, or if it is because the experience I describe in the identity text is one that resonates with them, or if it is simply because I have given them a rubric and the task of marking my identity text and providing support for the marks they assign.

Stage two. In the second stage, I invited the students to create their own identity texts using multimodal representations of significant aspects of their identities. They were then supposed to use these identity texts to create a first draft of their narrative text online.

Immediately following the presentation of my identity text, we planned to give the students three days to complete their own identity texts. The group ends up dividing into two: the ones who are interested in creating collages or paintings remain in the classroom with the teacher and work on those while the ones who choose to use the computer to complete theirs go to the computer lab. I work with the students who are in the computer lab. As I anticipated, many of them have difficulty with the activity. I circulate in the computer lab, much like I would as a classroom teacher. I assist students with the project as they request it. For many of them, the abstract idea of representing aspects of their identities visually is too challenging, so we work to adapt the task. For these students, the assignment becomes a PowerPoint of 10 images that connect to aspects of their identities or things that they like to do. Overall, the students seem quite engaged with the process – or at least more engaged than I have seen them previously. One student refuses to do anything that involves writing. When I explain that the assignment does not involve any writing, he begins to work.

Though the idea was to have the students create a narrative essay immediately following the creation of their identity texts, there are several interruptions and we do not get to work on the narratives until late April. By then, many of the students have forgotten their identity texts and do not use them to begin writing their narrative essays.

To begin the narrative essay, the teacher shares a narrative essay they have written on the theme of identity. It is beautifully written, perhaps too beautiful. The class seems to appreciate the candor in their writing, but many students also express frustration that they will be unable to write as beautifully as the teacher does. About half of the class seems able to work on their narrative essays with direct class instruction, while others struggle to find an idea that they think is worth writing about. Overwhelmingly students express that because of their age, nothing of interest or importance has happened to them yet.

Many students do not want to work with outlines or organize their thoughts before they begin writing. Some students engage with pre-writing processes more once I explain how using this writing process might assist them with their provincial exam. A few students ask me to read their essays and provide them with feedback. I do this in the same way that I conferenced with students when I was teaching adolescents in the classroom.

Stage three. In the third stage, I intended to engage in interviews with the students and to work collaboratively through the second and third drafts of the student narratives.

I begin interviewing much earlier in the process because I am worried I will run out of time. In the end, I speak to four students from the class. Because I don't have the chance to talk to some of the students who were less engaged with school, I shift my questioning to ask what participating students had observed in some of their peers. I believe the biggest barrier to talking to the students is the need for parental permission. Many students express interest in

participating, but they either lose their permission forms or do not think that they will be able to remember to get them signed.

There is very little student interest in collaborative work on the narrative essays. My involvement mostly consists of proofreading, giving minimal feedback, and clarifying the task. I also speak to administrators, teachers, a parent, and community members. These adult participants help to provide a historical and community context for the group of students.

Stage four. In the fourth stage, I planned to continue with the student interviews. I also wanted to conduct interviews with the classroom teacher, family and community members, peers, and administrators. During this phase I also intended to work with the classroom teacher to evaluate the final narratives.

There is no beginning to the phase when I speak to the classroom teachers, the family and community members, and administrators. I set up interview times whenever it is convenient for them, so these interviews take place throughout my time in the field. The students' peers do not express an interest in being involved in the study. I did not get approval from ethics to work with the classroom teacher on any assessment activities, so I am not involved in the evaluation process.

Chapter 5: The Iterations of the Dance (Data Analysis)



Figure 10. The Rainbow Creek Dancers performing *k'aad 'aww*. Photograph by Pardeep Singh. Used with permission.

In the story of the dogfish mother, the man listens to the dogfish mother's song carefully enough to memorize it. It is never explained how he learns it well enough to teach it to others. But in my experience, in order to teach we must first understand. The process of remembering the song and learning it well enough to teach it is like coming to understand our participants through their stories.

In research, the process of coming to understand the data is called data analysis. When we think about case studies from the perspective of Robert Stake (1995) and through the lens of the Indigenous storywork principles, we must consider the role of interrelatedness. That is, we need to remember how, as researchers, we are connected to the participants and in turn, how researchers and participants are connected to the stories they tell. This reminds me of Jo-ann Archibald's (2008) contention that "...since stories can be heard again and again, the meanings

that one makes or doesn't make from them can happen at any time" (p. 24). Therefore, I recognize that my understandings, as they are presented here, are based upon what I believe at the time that I am writing this and may change as I move further away from the experience.

In my process of data analysis, I drew upon multiple perspectives on data analysis, which guided my use of the iterations of the dance that I describe in this chapter. In Robert Stake's (1995) view, analysis of the data involves concentrating "on the instance, trying to pull it apart and put it back together again more meaningfully – analysis and synthesis in direct interpretation" (p. 75). When he engages in analysis he seeks to "make sense of certain observations of the case by watching as closely as [he] can and by thinking about it as deeply as [he] can" (pp. 76-77). Furthermore, he expressed a belief that the readers

are often more familiar with the cases than we researchers are. They can add their own parts of the story. We should allow some of this input to analysis to help form reader generalizations. The reader will take both our narrative descriptions and our assertions: narrative descriptions to form vicarious experience and naturalistic generalizations, assertions to work with existing propositional knowledge to modify existing generalizations. (p. 86)

Though this view of the readers' potential contribution to the analysis of the data is unusual, it does support the principle of interrelatedness that is so essential during this phase of the research. This perspective also emphasizes the importance for the researcher to provide adequate descriptions of the data and demonstrates this commitment to the portrayal of multiple realities.

Shawn Wilson (2008) agreed that there is no single reality that we are trying to understand, rather there are "many realities specific to the people and locations that hold them" (p. 37). Instead of trying to achieve a singular understanding, he suggested that "the goal is a

coming together between researcher and subjects to create a mutual reality and to find common meaning in the natural world” (p. 37).

Shawn Wilson (2008) and Robert Stake (1995) seem to agree that readers must be allowed to come to their own conclusions based upon the data that is shared and that these meanings can co-exist with those of the researcher. The idea of the reader bringing a part of themselves into the translation draws upon the principle of interrelatedness as well as Mikhail Bakhtin’s concept of dialogism (Shields & Edwards, 2005). As Shawn Wilson (2008) emphasized, “it is incumbent upon the other person to come to their own decisions on the shape that the new ideas will take and to make their own conclusions” (p. 94).

Following the Song of *k’aad ‘aww*

I remember all of the conversations that I have had in classes about how difficult it is to analyze data. I have done it before; I do not really find it difficult. There are so many books written on the subject, it is like following a recipe. You just find the method that matches your study and you follow the steps, cite the author, and it is done. But when I was faced with my own data, I quickly recognized that none of these approaches would work. My findings were complicated, and they did not fit with any of the analysis methods that I could find. Using a conventional or generic method felt contradictory to my ethical framework.

I met with my committee. They suggested that I needed to continue to “follow the song of the dogfish mother” to analyze my data. I knew that this was a more Indigenous way of analyzing data, so I looked to Indigenous scholars for guidance in this process. There were suggestions to use my intuition, so I was left trying to operationalize my intuition to analyze my data.

According to Margaret Kovach (2009), “at present, the Indigenous research community is small, and there is a dearth of writing on meaning-making within Indigenous inquiry” (p. 133). Nevertheless, I was able to find a short description of analysis in Shawn Wilson’s (2008) book *Research is Ceremony*. There, he suggested that in an Indigenous or relational context, “logic needs to become more intuitive as the researcher must look at the entire system of relationships as a whole” (p. 120).

As I described in Chapter 1, my father first saw the shark dance performed by a visiting dance group from Alaska. After he gained permission, our dance group began performing the shark dance. Since then, the dance has undergone several iterations. This is not unusual; as we come to understand more about a dance or as we work with it, it is common for more ideas to emerge about how to perform it. To date, the shark dance has undergone significant changes three times, resulting in four iterations of the dance. I have described them as: Dancing together in a circle; Dancing separately in a line; Connecting with the dogfish mother; and Dancing synergistically with the dogfish mother. In this chapter, I use these iterations to describe my method for data analysis.

Dancing together in a circle. The first time that my father saw this dance performed, the dancers danced together in a circle, their movements mimicking the shark traveling through water. In this iteration, the individual dancers danced together in a circle – the emphasis is on the individual dancers coming together to form a whole circle.

In the first phase of my analysis, I worked with all of the interview data as a whole. I read and re-read the interview transcripts in chronological order based on when the interviews took place. As I read through them, I highlighted anything that caught my attention, anything I

intuitively felt might be relevant to my work. In this case, following my intuition involved consideration of the following factors:

- How the data connected to the research questions: How can identity texts be used to enrich the writing process? How can narrative writing be used to strengthen student writing? How can narrative writing support students' identity explorations?
- How the data connected to the literature
- How the data compared to my previous experiences in the classroom
- How the data had significance within the context of the study

Any excerpt from the interviews that met one or more of these criteria was highlighted.

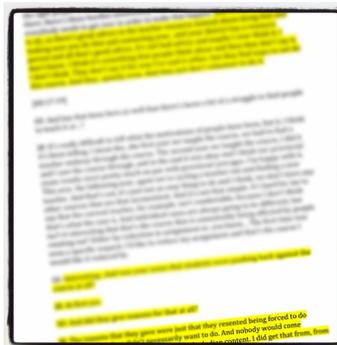


Figure 11. Intuitively highlighting significant interview excerpts.²⁰

Dancing separately in a line. What could be considered the second iteration was our dance group's first reinterpretation of the dance. In this iteration, the dancers formed a line at the front of the floor and danced individually. Each dancer had her own mask and wore her own button blanket, so there were no connections between the dancers. The emphasis in this iteration was upon the uniqueness and individuality of each dancer even though they were performing the same dance together.

In the second phase of my analysis, I looked at the parts of the stories that made up the whole. I did this by separating copies of the interview excerpts I had previously highlighted. I

began by cutting the highlighted sections of the transcripts into strips. At the end of this process, I had hundreds of interview excerpts that I read separately and spread out across my living room floor.



Figure 12. Interview excerpts on the living room floor.²¹

Connecting with the dogfish mother. In the third iteration, my father decided he wanted to incorporate supernatural beings into the dance, so he created a giant dogfish mother mask. In his view,

there is a fine line between the supernatural and reality. The way I see it is that the supernatural is in your mind, you're connected to the supernatural through your mind.

The artist's role is to make those images real in the form of objects, songs or dances.

(Davidson & Steltzer, 1994, p. 101)

The addition of this mask transformed the dance once again. In this iteration, the shark dancers separated the dogfish mother dancer from the audience, their bodies and their blankets creating a barrier between the audience and the supernatural being. In this iteration, the connection between the dogfish mother and the individual shark dancers was emphasized.

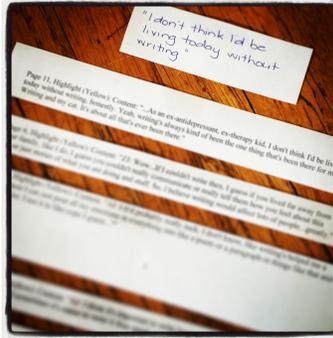


Figure 13. Finding the categories.²²

In the third phase of my analysis, I sorted the interview excerpts into categories based on their content. This was a difficult task as many of the categories overlapped with one another. In the end, I chose to sort them into categories based on which excerpts had the most connections with one another. In most cases, the category was named using a quote from one of the participants that I considered to be either connected to or representative of the other interview excerpts in the category.

As I sorted the interview excerpts into categories, I noticed that there were some larger overarching themes. To further explore these themes, I used the four walls of a room to organize the categories. I assigned each wall one of the larger overarching themes: English 10 First Peoples; literacy/writing at school; literacy/writing at home; and other notable observations which ended up including observations about relationships and connections between the students and the educators as well as teaching strategies. I then placed all of the excerpts with their categories on the appropriate walls.

Though I had initially imagined that the interviews with the students would produce lengthy narratives, I quickly recognized that the back and forth nature of our conversations did not lend itself to creating these longer narratives. Nevertheless, after placing the interview excerpts on the walls, I noticed that when they were read together they formed the story of my research.



Figure 14. Literacy/Writing themes on the wall.²³

Dancing synergistically with the dogfish mother. In the current iteration of the shark dance, the shark dancers wear button blankets that have been created specifically for this dance. Each blanket has a segment of the dogfish mother's body embroidered to the back of it. The dance begins when the line of shark dancers moves onto the dance floor. They keep their backs to the audience, so their embroidered blankets are visible to the audience thus highlighting the dogfish mother mask while hiding the dogfish mother dancer from view. As the shark dancers dance in unison, their backs create the body of the dogfish mother. Eventually when the dogfish mother dancer tires and leaves the floor, the shark dancers turn to face the audience wearing their masks – at this moment they are transformed into individual sharks. The emphasis in this iteration is the synergistic relationship between the dogfish mother and the shark dancers. The embroidered body of the dogfish mother on the shark blankets completes the dogfish mother mask in the same way that the dogfish mother mask completes her embroidered body on the backs of the shark blankets.

In this final phase of my analysis, I realized that the narratives I read in these overarching themes formed a story. Later, I understood that this could be considered a variation of the “collective story” described by Laurel Richardson (1988). As she explained, “A collective story tells the experiences of a sociologically constructed category of people in the context of larger sociocultural and historical forces. The sociological protagonist is a collective” (p. 201). Finding

a single story among multiple voices resonates with Arthur Frank's (2012) interest in "hearing how multiple voices find expression within a single voice" (p. 35) or Mikhail Bakhtin's notion of polyphony.

In her work with traditional-based Indigenous health services, Dawn Marie Marsden (2005) used the term "*collective storywork*, as a research methodology [that] is the active process of sharing, telling or engaging with multiple stories, for the purpose of documenting consistent and important themes [emphasis added]" (p. 195) and indicated that it "has as its intent, the representation or transmission of, primarily, many people's stories" (p. 195). She distinguished this from the term *collective stories* used to describe "the final versions of what has just been processed, through reflection, analysis and conclusion" (p. 195). Because she was working with research groups, her process was different than my own; however, I believe her use of the collective storywork methodology to produce collective stories significantly overlaps with my own process. In my work, the story was told through the multiple voices of the students, the educators, and the community members, and I simply needed to follow it and make it accessible to others.

Though Laurel Richardson (1988) and Dawn Marie Marsden (1988) did not address the potential use of collective stories to mask the identities of participants in a study, I recognized that by focusing on the collective story rather than the individual stories, I was better able to maintain the confidentiality of the participants. This is particularly important in a small community.

The challenge to make the story accessible is not unique; as Robert Stake (2010) described, in qualitative research "the story or history is seen to exist, and the researcher's job is to dig it out, interpret it, and make it available to others" (p. 170). In order to find this particular

collective story, I followed the story, then facilitated the dialogue, listened to the story, and then retold the story.

Following the story. I began by finding the segments of the collective story within each larger theme. I then traced the chronology of the story to determine how it was to be told, that is, I worked to piece the story together in a way that would facilitate the reader's understanding of the findings.

Facilitating the dialogue. Once I managed to tentatively piece together the story, I looked for interview excerpts that were representative of each of the categories that existed within each theme. Then, I began to write the stories on the page by placing the excerpts in order. While doing this, I paid particular attention to the dialogues that were taking place between the participants, the research, and myself. I then used those excerpts to carefully assemble the story.

Listening to the story. Occasionally, the stories did not lead anywhere or make sense, so I had to return to the data to find aspects that I had overlooked or misunderstood. This also involved returning to the original transcripts and audio recordings to ensure the accuracy of my earlier interpretations of the stories. For example, at one point I began by dividing a theme into two categories according to what the educators said and what the students said. I quickly realized that much of what the educators said resonated with what the students said and vice versa. This meant that I could follow the more compelling story of the ways in which the educators and the students together understood this particular topic.

Retelling the story. Once I had pieced the story together, I read the story in its entirety to ensure that it reflected what I had understood from the participants. I then returned the excerpts

to the participants in the study to ensure that they were comfortable with their contributions to the collective story.

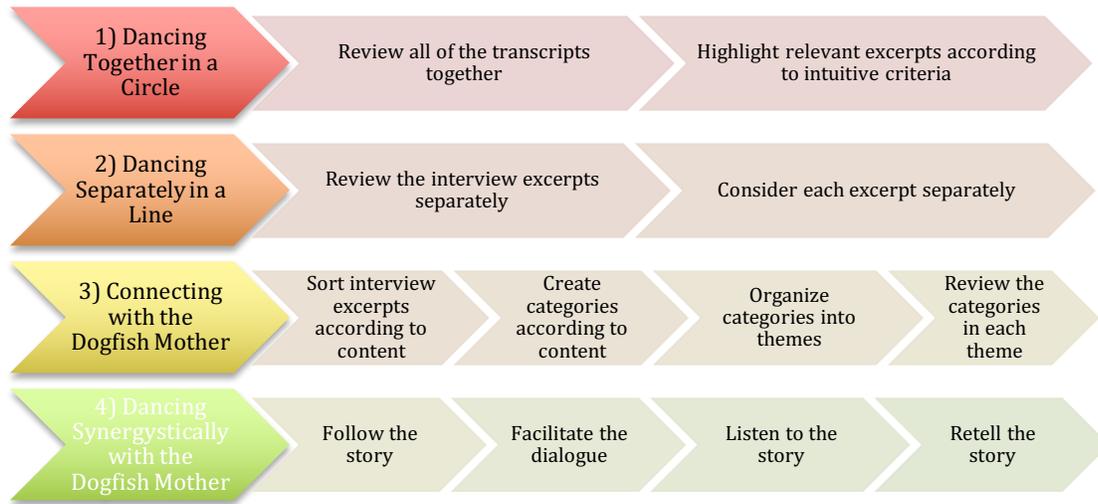


Figure 15. The Iterations of the Dance (Data Analysis). This is a visual illustration of the data analysis process used in this study.



It was not until I began analyzing the data that I realized the significant role of storytelling in my work. As an educator, I have always used stories as educational tools to connect with and teach my students. While doing this research, I quickly realized that I needed to remain open to the stories from my own life and experiences that came to me as illustrations of my understandings. Because some of these stories involved cultural practices and sometimes I only remembered fragments of the stories that needed to be told, I often contacted my father for guidance about what was appropriate to share publicly and to confirm details of stories that I had forgotten. In this case, I would listen to what my father said, I would take notes, I would write the story, and then I would email him what I had written to be sure that it was accurate and appropriate to share. Though this part of my process is referred to as member checking in the

field, I learned it from the way that I had learned Haida songs. First I would listen to the song, then I would sing it with my father, then I would sing it alone and my father would correct my mistakes, then when I got it right I would sing it publicly.

PART III: The Song of *k'aad 'aww*



Figure 16. Dogfish Mother mask in wood and Dogfish Mother mask in Bronze/Forton. Art by Ben Davidson/Photography by Jason Shafto. Used with permission.

To understand k'aad 'aww

*The man must understand
the place where she was found
and the ocean
from where she emerged.*

*He must understand
she does not breathe air,
so she is fragile
while she remains with him.*

*He must understand
she comes from the water,
so the language she speaks
is unfamiliar.*

*He must understand
that she needs to return
to the ocean
when he has finished
learning her chant.*

*And he must understand
the world
where he lives
is not hers.*

*So the responsibility is his
to ensure she is protected
before she is safely
returned
to her home.*



Figure 17. Ocean Washed.²⁴

Chapter 6: Community and Home Perspectives on Literacy



Figure 18. The Grocery List.²⁵

As an educator and a researcher committed to literacy education, I know that my eyes see the community differently. I look for evidence of programming and invitations to literacy events on the public bulletin boards and in newspapers. Because people know that I am here to do literacy research, they also bring such events to my attention. I am even invited to participate in a Trivia Challenge that is put on as a fundraiser for the local literacy organization. There are a handful of students there, but it is mostly community members and local teachers. I see this as evidence that the community is committed to supporting literacy...but if most of the community is not there, what does that mean? If the students are unaware of the writing contests and opportunities, do they exist?

As a former educator in the school district, I notice the early learning initiatives. I think that people take advantage of them, but I wonder if they were available when these grade 10 students were young enough to attend. I must remember these thoughts as I listen to what the participants say about the importance of literacy in the community. I avoid the temptation to

prompt them with my own knowledge of the community initiatives in the hopes of being able to hear what they actually believe.

When I began to design this study, I centred my questions around literacy and identity. I chose the research site for its capacity to provide answers to my questions and for its uniqueness; however, I did not anticipate the richness of what I would learn from the site itself. In the interview guides (see Appendices A-D), I included questions about the community, the school, and the English 10 First Peoples class to provide contextual information for the findings regarding literacy and identity. As I learned more about the context of the study, I was surprised at how quickly these contextual findings began to dominate my research.

Initially, I included these contextual questions because I agree with Elizabeth Noll (1998) that “school experiences [represent] only one part of my students’ total literacy experiences” (p. 207). Furthermore, I view literacy from a sociocultural perspective which “recognizes that the learning and use of symbols is mediated by and constituted in social systems and cultural practices” (Moje, Overby, Tysvaer, & Morris, 2008). This view aligns with more Indigenous beliefs about literacy that extend beyond text-based reading and writing to include a more holistic perspective, encompassing the individual and their community (Antone, 2003) as well as “culture, traditions, language, and ways of knowing and being” (Paulsen, 2003, p. 24).

Although the depth of the contextual information was unexpected at first, I was tremendously grateful for the details that emerged because, as I discussed previously, in qualitative case study, context is an essential component of helping to understand the case. As Robert Stake (2005) explained,

the case to be studied is a complex entity located in a milieu or situation embedded in a number of contexts or backgrounds. Historical context is almost always of interest, but so

are cultural and physical contexts. Other contexts often of interest are the social, economic, political, ethical, and aesthetic. (p. 449)

Shawn Wilson (2008) also emphasized the importance of context from a more Indigenous perspective in his view that

Interpretation of the context of knowledge is necessary for that knowledge to become lived, become a part of our collective experience or part of our web of relationships. So we contextualize everything that we do, and we do that contextualization in a conscious way. (pp. 102-103)

It is my hope that providing rich contextual information about the students' community and home will provide readers with enough information that they have the capacity to make their own interpretations of the data.

Community Perspectives on Literacy

The views on community perspectives about literacy were varied, ranging from the view that literacy was highly valued by the community to the view that it was not valued at all. Participants also distinguished between the publicly held views and the privately held views about the importance of literacy. According to one educator, Joseph,²⁶ each community is unique; however, he believed that this community values literacy a great deal and even attributed the success of the students to the value the community places upon literacy.

Every place is different. It has its own history and has its own, its own character, its own flavour. There's no way to generalize exactly what happens. But the education and the literacy is valued more here, I think, than it is other places that I've been. And I wouldn't say that judgementally either. I totally understand why [other communities] don't value it. And it's hard to get the kids to value it [in other communities] when their parents and

their Elders are out there bringing in food and managing to make ends meet and they have houses and they have cabins and they have hunting territories, hunting cabins, and they have stuff and they have skidoos, and they got quads and they got all this stuff, and they don't work and they never went to school. So why should I? And that just makes logical sense. So I think that's the answer, I think that's what it is, it's valued here, it's important. And so it's not necessarily anything that the school can take credit for. It, it really is something that I think the community needs to take credit for or can take credit for if it doesn't realize it already. There is support for the kids here at the school from home. (Personal communication [interview], April 16, 2015)

Another educator also believed that the community values literacy. Travis based his perspective on the numerous publications that have emerged from the community.

I think that there's fairly positive feelings towards writing, especially because there's so many books that come out of this area with regards to different things, like either culture or the ocean, you know different biology things. There's lots here that happens on a fairly regular basis, and I would say that a number of people or people they are connected to has either written in a book or been mentioned in a book or, you know, so I think that it's definitely smiled upon. (Personal communication [interview], March 30, 2015)

Alysha, a student, indicated that there is a range of views on the importance of literacy in the community; however, she explained that reading and writing are encouraged in her particular community.

I think in different parts of the community it varies, but our community in particular has...encourages writing a fair bit. And reading. (Personal communication [interview], May 22, 2015)

Petra, another student, agreed that literacy is valued, but in her opinion there is more of a focus on the art in the community.

[Here on Haida Gwaii], they encourage [literacy], but I think they encourage drawing and paintings more. (Personal communication [interview], May 21, 2015)

In contrast, another student felt very strongly that literacy is not valued in the community and provided examples to support this opinion; they expressed disappointment with the lack of literacy in the community.

No, I wish it was [important], but it really isn't. Like, I'm sure you've heard people talking about it, you know, like, I seen cousin up in the village or something like that, they don't conjugate their words very much, and use a lot of slang. It's more ghetto English....[I wish people would speak] properly, yeah....Not many people read and write around here, I mean there's like poets and stuff, like Haida poets, but not many...there's not many avid readers around here....I mean have you seen our library? It's always full and no books are ever out. If you take a look at the list, you can see, 20, 25ish students consecutively on there and there's no other students. (Student, personal communication [interview], date masked)

I believe that the examples this student provides at the beginning of this excerpt refer to the local dialect that is spoken by many of the Indigenous students in this community and others. From a deficit perspective, dialect is viewed as inferior to Standard English (see below for a more detailed discussion of dialect); however, in the work of Andrew Chodkiewicz, Jacquie Widin, and Keiko Yasukawa (2008) this was not found to be a useful perspective. In the previous excerpt, this student also indicated, it is easy to find support for the claim that literacy is not important to the community; however, the community member in the following excerpt provides

insight into some of the complexity surrounding the assumption that literacy is not valued in the community. Based on the perspectives shared here, it is clear that it may not be possible to easily measure the value placed on literacy in the ways described by the previous student.

People [in this community]...know that [literacy is] important and they want, especially their kids, to be successful, but they may not always actively model that. So then, I think kids get a mixed message on, so you say it's important to be a good writer, but you don't actually do that or it's good to be a good reader and understand what you're reading, but we don't see that in the house... I know that we have some, we have a small population of people that are illiterate and my aunt for instance, she tells when she grew up, when they would be reading that her dad, my *chinaay*²⁷ would say, you know things like, quit being so lazy, there's things to be done and you're just sitting there reading a book. And so, for some, that hasn't...it hasn't left or it hasn't...my aunt for instance, hasn't become an avid reader. If anything, she says she reads less and writes less because she doesn't want to be thought of as being lazy...So there are some that are illiterate...but they're really hard to notice. It's not something...so they've learned, I figure, they learned six times more than I did on how to function without being able to read. And they, you know, so you don't, they're not so noticeable. They're still there though. And we have kids who...in school, that have such a hard time with reading and writing. And at an early age, we know that. At kindergarten, by the end of kindergarten, we can sort of see the ones that are struggling more with that, but if our families aren't open or allow us to have extra support for that child, generally that child doesn't get any better. So somehow, I think...we need to have a different message on helping people become better at reading and writing, because we do know that it doesn't really matter what you do, you still need

to know how to read and write. And everybody holds that at a high value, but I think...sometimes the messages on that value are mixed or people...it's clear, but it's not. Does that make sense? Yeah, I don't know. So, all families want their kids to go to school and to do well and to be accepted and to be happy and they want them to come out of our schools with good tools to do whatever it is they want to do after. And sometimes I think as schools we might not be promoting the literacy end in a nice way or less...I don't know...less forceful. I'm not sure. I'm just thinking about that now, that, you know because that's, at schools that's what we do: reading and writing and math...and for the ones who struggle with it, I really don't think, I'm actually thinking about seven people who are now in their early 20s and they're still having a hard time and when they were in the school setting and we would work at having a meeting with the family to get more writing support or reading support and they'd just, especially Haidas, they did not, they didn't want that extra help. Because I think that sometimes, for some of them, that just reinforced that 'I'm just a dumb Indian' thought. (Community Member, personal communication [interview], date masked)

As this community member shared, the views about the value of literacy may conflict with culturally held views on, for example, the importance of making a contribution to the community (Davidson & Davidson, 2016). Furthermore, it is difficult to engage with literacy enrichment activities when involvement may be perceived as perpetuating the stereotype of the “dumb Indian.” In her work with learners from northern communities, Sharon Swanson (2003) explained that the stigma connected to the term literacy was problematic: “It is associated with low-level learners or uneducated individuals. This negative impression of literacy deters individuals from enrolling in a literacy program” (p. 69).

According to Jan Hare and Michelle Pidgeon (2011), “too often, Indigenous youth and their families are blamed for their failure to achieve in schools. This belief is rooted in deficit theories used to explain the school failure of students from low-income minority families that continues to be reproduced with disadvantage [sic] students from diverse linguistic and cultural communities” (p. 94). This deficit perspective may contribute to the persistence of the stereotype of the “dumb Indian” that permeates many Indigenous students’ and families’ experiences with school and can be particularly destructive, as this community member indicated. This negative stereotype also creates a barrier for students and families wishing to access support from the school. Elsewhere I have discussed the challenges of destructive stereotypes for students of Indigenous ancestry (Davidson, 2015); here, it is enough to emphasize that the “dumb Indian” stereotype continues to negatively impact the schooling experiences for Indigenous students.

Another educator suggested the high value placed on literacy may not be consistent across the entire community. In their view, public support for literacy initiatives comes mainly from the local societies and organizations geared toward improving literacy within the community.

The front that the community tries to put forward is [that literacy is] very valuable. I think there’s a lot of [local] societies that value it, that want to encourage it, and...but I think that overall within the community the actual practical application of it is not as highly valued. There’s still a lot of people who, a lot of families that don’t really push it or don’t really encourage it at home. Again, because I do have, I talk to elementary school teachers, I talk to a lot of different people about what they think and...you know, there’s families that value it, but only half of them, you know, and the other ones are not. It’s not- Maybe their family structure doesn’t allow that to happen. But like the official

part, like what the school wants, like the schools are very pro that. Literacy programs, there's a lot of things that are there and available on an official sort of front to say, yes, this is important. I think that the shift in attitude is changing, especially as Early Childhood Education or like, is becoming integrated with the cultures of both towns at a young age and families are pulling together and putting energy into it. I think the culture is going to be changing over time. (Educator, personal communication [interview], date masked)

Based on the participants' views, there are differing perspectives regarding the importance of literacy in this community. As these interview excerpts demonstrate, the views are diverse, yet strongly held. Despite this range of perspectives, I did find evidence at the community, district, and school levels to suggest that literacy is valued in the community.

Home Perspectives on Writing

To better understand the context of the students' experiences with literacy, I was interested in learning more about their literacy experiences at home. More specifically, I wanted to learn more about how mainstream literacy practices, and particularly writing, were viewed in their homes. This community member believes students model what they see in their homes.

Well, I think they model what they see, so if they have parents that write or parents that find some sort of importance with writing, I think they'll model that. You know, like when they're little, do you help them make lists? Do they see you writing? Do they see you reading? I think now, kids see people typing on their phone doing messages, doing all that kind of thing.... Do people put notes in their kids' lunches? That whole sort of idea of writing. I think kids learn from home too. If the home is supportive of the school

or not and that very much reflects on somebody's own experience. (Christine, personal communication [interview], March 13, 2015)

The students in the study consistently expressed that their parents were very supportive of writing in the home. Although it was unclear to me whether the students viewed their parents' perspectives on literacy as influential, the students' parents were actively modeling writing in the home and were supportive of students engaging in writing activities that did not pertain to school during the students' time at home. This was not an unexpected finding, as of the four students I interviewed, only Zach expressed that he did not like writing. However, he shared that his father really loved writing.

I know my dad really loved writing when he was younger, so that was...he was writing books when he was little, so...I thought that was pretty cool, but I never really liked writing that much. (Personal communication [interview], April 22, 2015)

In a later interview, when I asked about other influences on people's writing, Zach added that even though he had other interests, his family encouraged him to write.

My family encourages me to write, but I...I like other things. I like working and stuff so it's, it's hard to settle down and work. I am sure friends and just people who influence you. (Personal communication [interview], May 25, 2015)

HMD felt very supported by their family to write and even provided a recent example of how their mother had demonstrated this support.

My parents are still really supportive of me writing. They don't know how much I do it, but they're still really supportive....a few weeks ago, I was writing on the computer for my sister, and my mom was telling me, reminding me of that actual book that I presented

to everyone back [in school], and she was telling me that she really wished that I'd kept on with my writing. (Personal communication [interview], April 15, 2015)

Alysha indicated there are varied opinions about writing in her family, and she distinguished between writing and being artistic in her response.

My...brother doesn't like writing all that much, but I don't really mind it. But I like...it's kind of weird I like writing essays just 'cause it's...it's methodical and you just kind of like don't have to think about it, and I find it really easy and just comforting. My mom is really good at writing, like she's...words come easy to her, I guess. And like that. And my dad, he more is like, musical than, like, writing, and like artistic and things like that....My friends, most of them are okay with it and like they'll do it, but I don't know how they like it. (Personal communication [interview], April 17, 2015)

Alysha also expressed that she felt she was supported to write at home.

I think...me and my brother used to write together, like do little journal entries for school and stuff, so we were both encouraged to write at home. (Personal communication [interview], April 17, 2015)

Petra felt her parents supported her as well, particularly for writing that was done on paper instead of on computers.

I'm not too sure about [how] my friends [feel about writing now]. We haven't really talked about it, but my family, on paper, I said this before, they want more people to learn how to write on paper and not have autocorrect.... From what I've heard they just don't want the art of writing to die, because it seems like it's going towards that way. (Personal communication [interview], March 24, 2015)

Though the students I interviewed did not provide information about the other students in the class, they were unanimous in their belief that their own families were very supportive of their writing, even expressing that they felt encouraged to write. There was also evidence to suggest that literacy was valued in the community, but it was unclear whether this was a consistently held view.

Community and Home Perspectives on Literacy and Writing: Discussion

I found it promising that many of the participants in this study recognized that there was support for literacy learning from the community and the students' homes. Though I agree with the participants in this observation, I also share the opinion of those who suggested that this view may not be consistently held throughout the community. There are two ideas that I also want to follow up on further: the discussion about dialect and the stereotype of the “dumb Indian.”

Dialect. Though discussions about dialect only came up peripherally in my research, I overheard conversations about it while I was in the classroom and the community, and I was even approached by a member of the community with a request to assist a school to make English more of a priority. They provided examples to indicate dialect may have been the concern. The view that dialect English is an inferior form of English is deficit thinking, and it can be very destructive to Indigenous students (Chodkiewicz, et al., 2008). When I taught in my own classroom, I used journals as a place where students could write in dialect if they chose because I wanted students to know that I valued the multiple ways in which they communicated with me – including their use of dialect.

In her work with Indigenous people from Australia, Myra Dunn (2001) provided an example of how the inclusion of multiple perspectives might be achieved. She began by clarifying that “speaking a dialect of English does not in itself cause some kind of developmental

inadequacy that leads to unsatisfactory literacy levels” (p. 679), and then explained that the emphasis needs to be on codeswitching – that is providing instruction on when English dialect can be used without penalty in the school setting. To do this, educators need to recognize the value in integrating dialect English into mainstream schooling settings. Marie Battiste, Margaret Kovach, and Geraldine Balzer (2010) expressed a similar view:

All language is rich, and users of language bring understandings of community and communication to their speaking and writing. Insistence on the ‘Queen’s English,’ a standard that exists only in the imaginations of 19th-century grammarians and their followers, diminishes the communicative potential of English. We encourage educators to discover and celebrate the language riches of community by giving students access to additional variants rather than impoverishing them by demeaning their English. (p. 9)

I would encourage educators to find ways to support the use of dialect in classrooms alongside standard English instructional practices to ensure that the strengths that students bring to the classroom are not undermined.

“**The dumb Indian**”. Over the years, my father has told me the story many times of how the teachers thought he was a slow learner in school. He explains that when the teacher asked the question, he knew the answer but he had been taught that to raise his hand and call out the answers would be rude. Instead, he waited and it was assumed that he did not know the answers to the questions. As he described,

that was the other thing I remember, when the students were asked a question, it was always the white kids who had their hands up. Me, me, choose me, choose me. They were all so eager with the answer. We always stood back, but I never understood why. But it wasn’t our way. It wasn’t our way. So we were labelled as slow learners even

though we knew the answer, we didn't race to be chosen. (R. Davidson, personal communication [interview], July 11, 2014) (as cited in Davidson & Davidson, 2016, p. 11)

In elementary school, I first learned that to be Indigenous meant that you would be bullied and teased. It was through these experiences that I learned about the negative stereotypes that were associated with my ancestry – including that of the “dumb Indian.” In order to distance myself from these stereotypes, I made every effort to hide my ancestry though I never lied about it if I was asked directly. I attempted to resist negative stereotypes in another way by working hard in my courses and doing well enough not to be associated with the label. Of course, now I wish that I could have used my academic achievements to overtly challenge negative stereotypes such as the “dumb Indian.”

Because I believed that I was relatively successful at hiding my ancestry, I never viewed it as a barrier. Later, however, as an educator, I learned that my students viewed their Indigenous ancestry as a barrier to their academic success in school. Often I would have conversations with students about their challenges in school, and they would explain to me that they were stupid because they were an “Indian”. I worked with students individually to challenge this belief about themselves. I wanted these students to prove themselves wrong because I desperately wanted them to see that they were intelligent and capable regardless of their ancestry.

During this study, I heard references to the “dumb Indian” once again, as in the excerpt above. I heard how this label acted as a barrier for students seeking additional support that they may have needed to excel in school. I also heard echoes of this deficit thinking more subtly in conversations about resistance to English 10 First Peoples, the “dumbing down of English 10,” and the discussions about dialect. I am deeply concerned that this stereotype has persisted

through many generations. I know that I continue to face it in my work at the postsecondary level. I hope that by making these assumptions more transparent we can begin to overcome these highly destructive judgments which create barriers for Indigenous students pursuing academic success.

Chapter 7: Perspectives on Student Writing

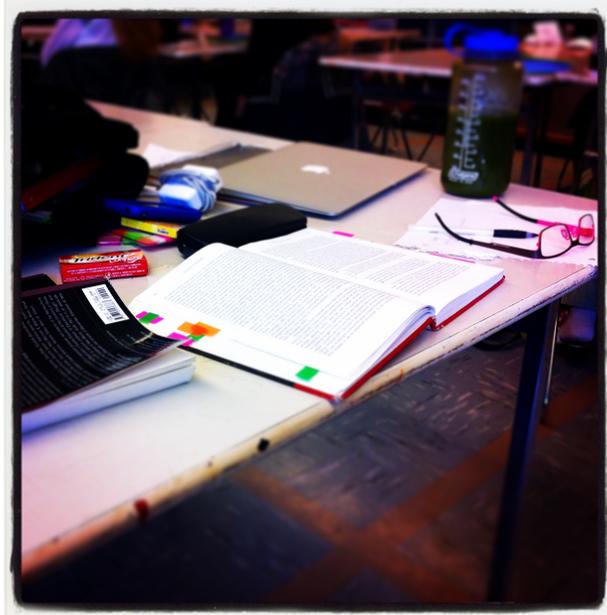


Figure 19. Pink Glasses.²⁸

I chose to focus on writing in this study because it seemed to be what students in my classes struggled with most. Usually I could find a book that students were willing to read or suggest a strategy to use when they were working with a difficult text. But when it came to writing, I could not always find a way to support them to put words on the page.

Based on my challenges, I decided to introduce journals into my class – to provide a place for students to write where there were no rules of grammar or punctuation or spelling. This seemed to work better, but it often took a while to establish enough trust for the students to be willing to write to me in their journals. I imagine this is because writing leaves us vulnerable. We cannot hold a pen in our hand and pretend to write in the way that we can hold a book and pretend to read. When we write, we are faced with a blank page or screen, and it is up to us to find a way to fill the empty space. And when we do, our thoughts and our abilities become visible for everyone to see and judge.

As I sit here writing this, I can feel my own struggle to find the right words...and I am aware that later someone will be reading this part of me. It is incredibly intimidating and I want to hold onto the memory of the fear of the risks I am taking, so I can remember what I am asking students to do when I ask them to write in the future.

Perspectives on Student Writing

According to Marie Battiste (1986) Indigenous literacy is a “relative social concept more reflective of culture and context than of the levels of formal instruction by which it is usually measured” (p. 24). In this view, literacy can be described as holistic and the use of the Medicine Wheel, which incorporates mental, physical, spiritual, and emotional knowing, is used to assist in its description (e.g., Antone, 2003; Paulsen, 2003; Swanson, 2003). In her discussion of historical perspectives on Indigenous literacy, Lynda Curwen Doige (2001) succinctly defined Indigenous literacy as “the ability to use reading, writing, reasoning, listening, and speaking to make meaning from contemporary visual symbols that communicate ideas, values, and traditions in society” (p. 117).

Though I attempted to draw upon more holistic perspectives in my discussions about literacy and writing, most of the participants seemed more comfortable with conventional views of literacy that focused solely on text-based reading and writing. This is not unusual (e.g., Luttrell & Parker, 2001), but it may be partially explained by the fact that much of my focus was on student writing. When I was interviewing students and educators, I left it to them to define writing. When they requested clarification, I would offer that I held a very broad view of writing that included texting, Facebook messaging, and other forms of informal writing as well as what could be referred to as school-based writing. Based on the conversations we had, it was clear to me that the students’ school-based writing practices were privileged.

In the study, educators, students, and community members had different perspectives on how students viewed writing and the importance of being able to write. The educators seemed to believe that most students understood the importance of being able to write even though they did not enjoy writing; however, most of the students in the study indicated that they did enjoy writing. The students described writing as a private or personal activity and they held differing beliefs about the role of gender and ancestry in connection with writing. Perhaps the most compelling aspects of the interviews came when student participants talked about the significant role of writing in their lives.

“I think a lot of them look at it as sort of a chore”. When I asked the educators what they believed about how the students in the class felt about writing, they expressed a range of thoughts, although they all seemed to agree that writing was not a favourite activity for most students. Michael believed that students do not value writing and that they have moved to a more utilitarian view of writing.

Not that important. They don't [believe writing is important]. I don't think so. No, I think they see writing as just a means of getting a message across. It's the texting generation. So why should I have to write a paragraph when I can tell you in a sentence what I mean? They don't see it as a valuable means of communicating. They see it as short, almost like sound bites with the oral component, but it's one sentence. That's enough. That's all you should need. (Personal communication [interview], March 31, 2015)

Although Michael stated that students do not see writing as a valuable means of communicating, he seems to be referring to the kind of writing we privilege in school. His reference to short sound bites indicates that students are quite keen to use texting and view it as a valuable means of communicating.

According to Travis, there are multiple perspectives with regard to writing in the cohort of grade 10 students.

Some of [the students in the class] yes, definitely [believe that learning to write is important]. There's such a spectrum in this group that it's...I would say a strong yes for some students.... Moving towards absolutely not, to the point that certain students won't even engage in the writing activities. It feels like almost anything that I propose, very very limited information will come back. And there's a little bit of a...tone with some of the students that...that maybe they can get away without working quite as hard on their writing and still get by with it. Like they don't really see the importance of the proofreading and the following certain structures. Like they'd rather just, they like to do it as quickly as they can and feel like they have strong enough skills to move forward when in reality their skills are okay, but really need to be improved on this year in order to be successful later on.... (Personal communication [interview], March 30, 2015)

As Travis indicated, students in school display tremendous resistance to engaging in the actual act of writing. He believed the students did the least amount of work to get by in class.

Furthermore, if they had basic writing skills, they were not motivated to improve in the way that he hoped. A couple of student participants echoed this sentiment when I asked them about their writing process. In response to these questions, most students focused upon completing the work rather than putting effort into improving the quality of their writing (see Chapter 8 for a more detailed description of the students' writing processes).

Joseph agreed that students focused upon completing assignments; however, he also indicated that students learn that to achieve the highest mark, they must present information or ideas that reflect those of their teacher.

I think as writers, I would generalize that. I think they really don't...it can be about work completion. I want to get the assignment done and get the mark, so I can pass the course and that's what I want. The highest mark I want is...the highest mark I can get is by copying and saying again exactly what the teacher wants to hear. And I get that from kids a lot, so I think that's where they are in terms of writing. (Personal communication [interview], April 14, 2015)

Travis also indicated that students did not seem to see the value in working to improve their writing.

I guess they did engage in the journal writing, but yeah, I guess it would be in terms of improving their writing. They don't really see the value of that, but maybe of writing in general, they do see something purposeful there, I think. (Personal communication [interview], March 30, 2015)

Alex recognized that there were some students in the class who enjoyed writing outside of school but echoed that most of the students viewed writing as a chore.

I think there are a few of them who do enjoy writing and who write in their free time, maybe. But overall, I wouldn't say that it's something, I think a lot of them look at it as sort of a chore. (Personal communication [interview], April 8, 2015)

In a later interview, Alex reflected on some other observations of the class and provided more insights into why students might struggle with writing, for instance, students might lack the knowledge to write on a particular topic. At the end of this excerpt, Alex suggested that some of these challenges might be overcome when students engage in narrative writing about their own lives.

I think that being able to write about their own lives and things that...they...just know very well themselves was probably really helpful, because I think a lot of the time, like, they say like, I don't know how to write or, you know, I don't know what to write about and it's often because they're sort of intimidated by the subject matter or they just don't feel as knowledgeable as they should be. And so, yeah, being able to write about themselves or things that have happened [in the narrative essay], probably took away some of that anxiety. (Personal communication [interview], June 2, 2015)

According to Ramone, different students have different abilities and interests when it comes to writing. However, he also believed that the students appreciated stories, in particular they valued the written part of stories.

There's some who...some who find, I mean, different students have different skills, some find the poetic to be so engaging for them, that's what they connect with, that's what they are able to just explore that and so they want to do that and the other kids that are very realistic, practical, you know, why wouldn't you just call it a hard desk? You know, rather than trying to say, you know like describe it in this extreme language which reflects emotion like, they don't like that. Other things that I see the students...a lot of the students do also enjoy. I don't get to see them produce it as much but like stories, they really get drawn into them. Especially when you read the stories aloud. I do that in some of my classes. I don't get to see them produce as much because I don't teach that where you have stories, but I see them valuing that at least, valuing the written part of it. (Personal communication [interview], April 14, 2015)

He also indicated there is a lack of connection between writing at school and writing in general.

There seems to be sometimes a disconnect. Not in all students, but just in some between the value of writing in class and writing in general. (Ramone, personal connection, April 14, 2015)

Overall, the educators believed that most students did not enjoy writing. Though none of the educators speculated too much about why this was the case, one community member suggested that it was because writing is so readily available and students only engage with short texts.

I think the kids nowadays, and maybe it's just my kids, but it's [my daughter's] group of friends as well. They don't...see the value in writing as we did, because it's so available. You know, there's so much of it and the publishing industry also is, you know, it's getting to be different now there's some publications now that are just online, you can't even buy the books, so...I don't know if they see it as a skill that is as valued as...it used to be. Maybe I'm jaded, but if you look just a few years ago when my kids were small we used to get the paper from Vancouver that would be flown up and you know, people don't do that anymore, you just go and click on the website and people read really quick. You don't read a whole article, you just glance at it and...I see that the kids they read like that too. You know, they have, something will pop up on Facebook and there's a thing to read, so they'll just read the highlights of it. And I find that when they write things, you know, little emails or Facebook messages, they're really short like that too. Not just abbreviations, but short in what they write. (Cristo, personal communication [interview], March 26, 2015)

Cristo speculated that this move to the use of electronics to share textual information would result in the end of handwriting, and it was possible in the future that students may not know how to write. Though I believe this to be a slightly exaggerated view, it speaks to the sense of

loss that Cristo feels as a result of the transition from writing with pen and paper to the use of electronics.

Electronics is the way of the future. You can say whatever you want about it. It's those kids that are using it now, they're going to be running the world in a few years from now. Writing, personally, I love it. I like getting a letter, I like, you know penmanship is important to me. But, I'm 57 years old. Is it going to be important for my kids? They're going to do it, but I don't know if their kids are going to know how to do it. (Personal communication [interview], March 26, 2015)

On the whole, the educators and community members seemed to agree that most students did not value writing. Though they could think of a few exceptions, educators and community members also believed that even when students liked writing or were impartial, they were unwilling to work on improving their writing.

Only Zach's view of writing aligned with the educators' and community members' perspectives. He was very open about the fact that he did not enjoy writing. However, he had the ability to write and so he did not engage in many of the strategies I observed in the class to avoid writing, such as texting, watching videos on the computers, leaving class, or playing games online. He described writing as a task that had to be completed.

I still don't like writing, but if I have to write, then I'll buckle down and write, but it doesn't...it's not one of my interests or.... Like, if they tell me to write an essay or something like that, then I'll write it, like I won't not write it, like...I'm fine. I can come up with the words and write the essays, but I don't like it.... (Personal communication [interview], April 22, 2015)

“It’s kind of something I like”. Despite the fact that the educators believed most students did not enjoy writing, three of the four students interviewed for the study described enjoying writing and indicated that writing was one of the activities that they did regularly outside of school. I recognize that my sample of students is not representative of the class; however, it is interesting to note that the students had different views than the educators about their writing.

HMD explained that they had less time for writing in grade 10 than they had in previous years; however, they still used writing as an outlet for emotions, a view that was consistently expressed throughout the interview.

I don’t write as often as I used to because I’m a lot more into my studies. But I still definitely write a lot. Last time I sat down and wrote for a good hour was two or three weeks ago....[What I write] all depends on how I’m feeling. If I’m happy, I’ll write a book or a happy poem. If I’m feeling depressed, I’ll write, you know, a morbid poem, anything like that. (Personal communication [interview], April 15, 2015)

Alysha seemed reluctant to admit that she enjoyed writing. This led me to wonder whether writing outside of school time may not have been highly regarded by her peers. However, her apparent discomfort might simply have been connected to the kind of writing that she enjoyed, as there seemed to be some respect for students who were able to write raps outside of school time. She also alluded to there being a type of student who would write poetry outside of school.

Most people are kind of surprised because I’m not...I don’t know...they don’t know that I’m the type of person that would like, write poetry or something, outside of school, but it’s kind of something I like. (Personal communication [interview], May 22, 2015)

HMD also suggested that there is a certain type of student who writes. In this excerpt, HMD seemed to imply that writing was okay when you belonged to a particular social group. However, other students indicated that it was okay to like writing without mentioning particular social groups.

Most of the [students in the class] don't like to write. There's kind of like the partygoers, the loners, the populars, the depressed kids...the adrenaline junkies and the...you know, wild cards. The depressed people and the wild cards are usually the people that write the most. (Personal communication [interview], April 15, 2015)

Because of my confusion about what made someone a “wild card,” I asked for an explanation. HMD explained that wild cards were students who “don't fit into a category, but they can kind of blend in with any category” (Personal communication [interview], April 15, 2015).

This conversation about the types of students who are permitted to write was reminiscent of Wendy Luttrell and Caroline Parker's (2001) finding that “there is a complex and dialogic relationship between students' literacy practices and their evolving identities in the figured worlds in which they are recruited and participate” (p. 245). Though this observation occurred in connection to different academic strands at school, I believe that it can be equally applied to social groups.

When I began this study, I believed that students were uncomfortable with the fact that they enjoyed writing. I had interpreted their preference for writing at home as support of this. However, I learned that decisions to write at school may be influenced by peer views about which social groups are permitted to write.

“I just kind of like to keep it secret”. One day while I was observing the class writing in the computer lab, a substitute teacher came in to work with the students. Instead of sitting at

the front of the class as other teachers had, he circulated around the class and read what students were writing on the computers over their shoulders. I noticed that the students seemed aware that he was doing this, and I wondered if it had an impact on their writing. Another day, after the students were promised that no one would read their rough drafts, a different substitute teacher came into the class and began reading their drafts. This seemed to make the students uncomfortable, so I let the substitute teacher know that the students had been told that their drafts would not have to be shared with the teacher at this stage. These observations led me to wonder about the impact of privacy on students when they are writing. I asked the students whether they felt that knowing their writing was private influenced their writing. Alysha said that students can be more open when they write for themselves.

In a sense I guess so because when you're writing and it's just for yourself, you just kind of tend to.... open up more in a sense and they...and you know it's just for...like you're going to be reading it, but if you're writing for the public, like you're more...careful about how you make it sound. (Personal communication [interview], May 22, 2015)

Petra agreed that keeping writing private affected the quality. However, she explained that she writes in private because she believes that others will ask to read her writing if she does it in public, and she does not want them to be disappointed if she does not share her writing.

I think it's true [that people are writing for themselves in private] because if you write in private or something for yourself, like if it's private, it could just be how you're feeling about the day, like sometimes to express emotions people write it. And if you're writing publicly, people are going to be like, coming up to you and saying, like, oh what are you writing there? Can I read it?... Yeah, and if you say, it's private, they're like, aww come on, can I please read it? It's like, no.... I haven't really told people [that I write], but.... I

don't know. I just kind of like to keep it secret....I don't think that people would find it weird or anything because everybody has the ability to write, but it depends on if you actually want to.... But I keep it private because, I don't know, people might ask if they can read it, and it's like, I really don't want to disappoint them by saying no. (Personal communication [interview], May 21, 2015)

Petra also informed me that she didn't tell her family that she writes because she believes it is personal. HMD agreed that it would definitely affect them if someone was reading what they were writing.

Well, yeah, I told you the story about how somebody once stole my notebook and read it out and thought it was hilarious. So yeah, honestly, the easiest way to do it is just burn it all in my opinion and then...yeah, it's just how it works for me.... It doesn't really matter to me [if they read it] as long as I know the person, if somebody like that I didn't know very well was trying to...read it over my shoulder out loud, I'd definitely stop writing.... You know if somebody was just reading it over my shoulder, I'd probably write a little differently, slightly less personal, because you know, it's not just disappearing. (Personal communication [interview], May 25, 2015)

Zach also found it easier to write in private simply because of the distractions at school. He clarified that his preference for writing at home had nothing to do with the fact that he might not want people to know that he wrote letters to his grandmother.

I think it's more distracting in a classroom, for sure. Like in...I don't know, because I was writing letters to my grandma just the other day and I just sent them off and I don't know. It's good to just sit down in your room alone and just, you know, think on life and I could look outside and...it's not noisy like in a classroom. Everyone's just playing on their

phones or talking or something or playing music. (Personal communication [interview], May 25, 2015)

I agree with Petra's statement that everyone has the ability to write, though at different levels. I also believe that those students in the class who struggled with writing often used the strategies that I mentioned previously to avoid engaging with writing activities. None of the students I interviewed indicated the reason why students did not like to write was because they were unable to do it; however, this may have to do with the fact that all four of the student participants were able to write proficiently.

“Girls are just more public about their writing”. With few exceptions, the students did not see any differences with regard to gender and ancestry when it came to writing. Two students offered thoughts on why there may be a perception that female students like writing more.

Alysha thought that females are more public about their writing.

I don't think [there's a gender difference in writing], I think girls are just more public about their writing. (Personal communication [interview], May 22, 2015)

HMD agreed that females are more open about their writing than males.

I think some girls are a lot more open that they write than some guys. But other than that it's fairly gender neutral. (Personal communication [interview], May 25, 2015).

Zach expressed a belief that girls write more than boys, though he did not know how he knew that.

I do think that girls write more than boys, but I don't know where I've seen that. But, yeah, I don't know why I'm like that, but I do think it. (Personal communication [interview], April 22, 2015)

Petra emphasized that it is really about the individual person and has nothing to do with gender at all.

Sometimes, like boys with like...a boy would like writing more than a girl or sometimes a girl would like writing more than a guy. It really depends on the person. (Personal communication [interview], May 21, 2015)

Three of the four students agreed that ancestry did not make a difference; however, Alysha, a student of mixed Haida ancestry, had the following explanation for why non-Haida students write more than Haida students:

I think that non-Haida students would write more than Haida students because in the Haida culture it's oral tradition, so it's not...I don't want to say natural, it's not like ordinary for them to...write a lot, they more just like speak their thoughts...opposed to what Europeans do. (Personal communication [interview], May 22, 2015)

I appreciated the students' perspective that girls are more public with their writing, though it conflicts with my own classroom experiences where I noticed that male students were less willing to engage in writing than female students. According to Michael Smith and Jeffrey Wilhelm (2009), "it is clear that a gap exists between the performance of boys and girls, especially in regard to writing" (p. 368), and they conclude that the relationship between boys and literacy is very complex. Lastly, I found it reassuring that the commonly-held deficit perspectives about Indigenous students and academic achievement (e.g., Chodkiewicz, et al., 2008; Noll, 1998) did not surface in these interviews with the students.

"I don't think I'd be living today without writing". One of the most compelling statements from the entire study came in response to the question about how the student's lives would be without writing. The students' responses were varied, but they all expressed that

writing made their lives better. One student even indicated that they would not be alive without being able to write. This response caught my attention because it was so definite, and it resonated so much with my own experiences with writing when I was in high school. Though the students, educators, and community members held a range of beliefs about writing, this statement reminded me of the power of writing and how it can serve as an outlet and as a companion when people are going through difficult times.

As an ex-antidepressant, ex-therapy kid, I don't think I'd be living today without writing, honestly. Yeah, writing's always kind of been the one thing that's been there for me. Writing and my cat, it's about all there's ever been there. (HMD, personal communication, April 15, 2015)

Alysha echoed this sentiment, though not quite as forcefully.

It'd probably really suck. I don't know, like writing's helped me a lot because I can just pour all my emotions [and] everything into like a poem or a paragraph or things like that and it's just a lot, I use it to cope I guess. (Personal communication [interview], April 17, 2015)

Alysha added that "it's important to write because we need to like have a way to express ourselves and sometimes it's easier to write it than speak it" (Personal communication [interview], April 17, 2015). Zach touched on using writing to help maintain relationships as well.

Wow. If I couldn't write then I guess if you lived far away from your family, like I do, I guess you couldn't really communicate or really tell them how you feel about this or...or just stories of what you are doing and stuff. So, I believe writing would affect lots of people...greatly. (Personal communication [interview], April 22, 2015)

Petra indicated that writing gives people permission to share parts of themselves that they may not be comfortable sharing in conversations on the phone or in person. Though she focused more on school in her answer, in other parts of her interviews she indicated that she regularly engaged in writing outside of school.

At school, if you can't write, it's like okay, how are you going to get essays done? How are you going to write notes? How are you going to write anything? And at home, you have to write lists sometimes, or just write something. (Personal communication [interview], March 24, 2015)

It was interesting to me that she chose to focus on the impact at school given that she engaged in writing activities for pleasure at home; however, this supports the view that writing is really perceived as a school-based activity.

Overall, I was relieved to know that students engaged in their own literacy practices. I found it reassuring to learn that students seem to enjoy writing more than their teachers know.

Perspectives on Student Writing: Discussion

When I began this research, I held several assumptions about how adolescents viewed writing; many of these views were not supported by the findings from this study. I was particularly interested in the fact that students preferred to keep their writing secret for various reasons, not because they were concerned that they would be poorly judged if their peers found out that they liked writing. I was also intrigued by the fact that most of the student participants did not believe that there was a difference between genders when it came to enjoying writing nor did they believe there was a difference between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students. I was particularly taken by the significance of writing in the lives of the student participants.

The students who struggle with writing. *When we began creating the identity text, one student sat at his computer and refused to do anything. When he explained that he did not do writing, I told him the activity that we were doing could be completed without writing a single word. Without much more resistance, he began the activity.*

In this study, I wanted to speak to students who did not like writing and who struggled with it, but they were unwilling to come forward. In the end, I had to ask the students with whom I spoke to share some of their observations of other students in the class who may have had different views from their own. This made it difficult to gain an understanding of the challenges with writing for students who struggled. Furthermore, my experience with the student who was willing to engage in the activity without writing, made me wonder how many students are not engaging with tasks that involve writing without even attempting them.

Chapter 8: Perspectives on Writing at Home and School

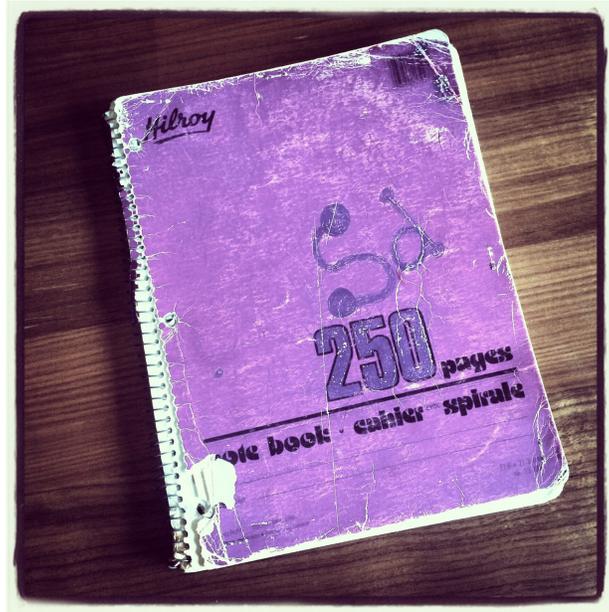


Figure 20. High School Secrets.²⁹

When I was in high school, I wrote. Poems filled with teenage angst, notes to friends brimming with secrets and wishes and frustrations. I wrote endless pages about the minute details of my life in a purple spiral bound notebook that I kept hidden in my pile of binders for school. I never thought of myself as a writer, but I wrote. It never occurred to me to wonder why I did. I only knew that it helped me to feel better.

Now I wonder if I learned it from home. I was encouraged to write letters of thanks for gifts from family, we kept journals on vacation, but I do not remember much beyond that. I remember trips to the library and books being read aloud, I learned to love reading from home...but where did I learn to love writing?

Perspectives on Writing at Home

Because I wanted to learn more about the kind of writing students were doing at home, I asked the students to share their experiences with writing at home and writing at school. The students explained that the greatest difference between the writing they were doing at home and

school was choice: they indicated that they felt they had far more choice in what they wrote at home and could engage in writing activities that were not practiced at school. Despite the fact that the students described differences between the writing activities at home and at school, they did not view them as conflicting like the high school students in Wendy Luttrell and Caroline Parker's (2001) study did. HMD explained they appreciated the freedom that they had at home.

[The difference between what I learn at school and what I learn at home is that] I've got a lot more freedom to learn what I want to learn at home. You know, I mean grade 10 and my class is learning stuff that I learned a few years ago from my family and at home. (Personal communication [interview], April 15, 2015)

HMD also described engaging in self-directed learning at home on topics of interest.

I was actually learning a fair bit at home about writing....Yeah, we had a computer at home and I had just gotten an iPod around that time, I got loads of poetry and ebooks onto my iPod, so I was definitely becoming more into literature by the day. I got really into people like Shane Koysczan, he does spoken word. (Personal communication [interview], April 15, 2015)

Zach explained that he did not like writing, but he did write letters to his friends and his grandmother to stay connected with her. He did not mind that kind of writing, but he did not consider it real writing.

Well, I think my dad and grandma are pretty...they still like writing. They still write and they like me to write, but I just...you know, I guess I do write at home. Just letters to my friends and stuff, but that's not really writing.... I do write snail mail letters to my grandma and stuff like that, but other than that...like.... I do enjoy writing about what I

do or what I'm working on or to my family...I don't really like to share with everyone.

(Personal communication [interview], April 22, 2015)

Petra explained that she liked writing one shots at home. I was not really clear on what a "one shot" was, so I asked her to explain it to me.

Like, if it's just like a...usually people put it up [online] as a one shot, so it's like a...page.... It's usually in like fan fiction with characters? And it's just a little short story of a page.... It doesn't have to specifically be on one page because it's online so you just write it, but then usually people might continue it, it's just like that. That's the whole story. If you want to continue it, you use your mind. (Personal communication [interview], March 24, 2015)

I was intrigued by the idea of the one shots. They reminded me of times when I had run out of teaching ideas, and I had the students write stories collaboratively in multiple parts by passing them around the room. When I reflect on that now in the context of this study, I realize that the practice had components of what students enjoyed: freedom and connection with their peers.

The educators' perceptions of the writing that was happening at home seemed to overlap in part with what the students were sharing with me. Travis believed that some students wrote at home for fun.

I know for sure that some of them do write at home, kind of as a fun, just for fun, from talking to their parents. And I know that a number of the, at least a few, have parents that strongly support them developing their writing skills, so whether or not they do anything to actually, outside what we do with them at school, I don't really know. (Personal communication [interview], March 30, 2015)

In Ramone's view, the writing that students were doing at home was more practical in nature.

I get the sense that they do some basic, sort of like personal development writing of like their resumes because I see that portion of it, and I do see that they come with, oh I wrote this letter for this job or something like that. A little bit of email, a little bit of Internet, sort of online typing and texting. I don't see too much more than that from my perspective, at least. I don't have a big window into that part of their life. (Personal communication [interview], April 14, 2015)

Travis also believed that many students were writing poetry and rap outside of school.

The other big one is poetry and raps, is the other.... Not to do with school, they're spending their weekends writing raps.... I think that there's [also] probably some creative writers in there, like...but yeah, I don't know. Maybe some story writers. Like I can think of a few people that I don't have my thumb on completely, but I could see them writing stories at home on their own. (Personal communication [interview], March 30, 2015)

Again, among the four students there was a significant amount of writing going on at home. In the students' view, the writing they were doing at home differed significantly from what they were doing at school, to the extent that often they did not consider their home literacy practices to be *real* writing.

Perspectives on Writing at School

All of the participants in this study believed there were differences between writing at school and writing at home; these differing perspectives are also reflected in the literature (e.g., Luttrell & Parker, 2001; Moje, 2002; Noll, 1998). In the hopes of further understanding how some of these practices differed, I asked the students, educators, and community members about writing in school. I learned there was a perception that writing options for students were limited at school. Students felt they did not get to express their opinions enough; however, they believed

the writing they did in class would help them to prepare for university. Interestingly, students placed a great deal of emphasis on the importance of correct spelling and, even if they did not follow the full writing process, they seemed to agree that it was important to review their writing assignments before handing them in. Finally, educators expressed that they had more success when students felt confident about the topic and were encouraged to write about their personal experiences.

“There’s not a whole lot of creative writing options”. Overall, the educators said that the opportunities for writing at school were somewhat limited. As Travis pointed out, there was a range of instructional activities going on in the English classroom; however, there were not a lot of creative writing options.

There’s not a whole lot of creative writing options, it’s more, like literary responses to novels, it’s...speeches. They’ll write speeches sometimes, writing in response to textbooks, you know, answering questions.... How to write a thesis statement, how to write a proper paragraph, the structure of sentences, you know, what needs to happen there. I know that there have been fairly big units on grammar and punctuation and things like that. (Personal communication [interview], March 30, 2015)

Ramone echoed many of the instructional activities listed by Travis above; however, he also wished there was more practical writing instruction for students.

They have to write lyrics, they have to learn, like the structure of poems and essays. They do a lot of practice around that. They’re being taught how...the proper way of research and expression.... And general professional communication, that they’re being taught. They’re being taught email etiquette, professional letter writing, resume writing, for the purposes of all the things we have “on island,” I wish that we taught grant writing, for

example. That'd be a huge thing in here. (Personal communication [interview], April 14, 2015)

Ramone went on to describe that in his own classroom, he had the students engage in different kinds of writing activities than those that occurred in the English classroom. He also added that students spent a lot of their class time communicating with their friends online. This is completely consistent with my observations during my time at the school.

They...a lot of the answers are written. Like a lot of the assignments, a lot of everything that they do. They do a lot of copying and notes, a lot of that. And...in the classes I've taught, not a lot of them are really open to freeform except for [in the course I taught] where I really try to get them to express their opinions, most of that is in answer to questions. And so, but other than that, outside of my classes at school, they are writing essays and...doing a lot of online, a lot of [online] chatting I notice as well. (Personal communication [interview], April 14, 2015)

Alex explained that there had not been many formal writing opportunities yet. However, they also pointed out that there was a range of responses to the writing opportunities that had been provided.

They had the practice provincial exam where they had to...well, they were supposed to answer a couple of essay questions, some of them really went for it and wrote a whole lot and some of them either didn't write anything or wrote a couple sentences. And then, I can't remember what else I've done. I guess like reading passages and answering questions about them. But it hasn't been very intensive writing so far. (Personal communication, April 8, 2015)

Travis was aware of a perception in the community that there was not enough formalized writing opportunities in schools.

There's general conversation about...there not being enough formalized writing, but I haven't actually heard that from family and friends of the students in the class....maybe more from the community. (Personal communication [interview], March 30, 2015)

I, too, have heard such comments; however, one of the community members I interviewed indicated that they knew that the students were doing a unit on poetry and that they were also working on essays; this community member felt that the students were receiving adequate writing instruction.

“I don't really get to do my opinion”. The students did not express much excitement about what they were learning in English class. HMD described the writing in school as “very controlled.” As they indicate here, there was some frustration about the level of control that occurs in school writing.

[Schoolwork writing is] very controlled. I don't really get to do my opinion; it's just right or wrong answer. Like we'll read a book, in English we read, *The...Absolutely True Diary of a Part Time Indian*, and instead of writing our opinion pieces we wrote, you know, like what is this? What happened here? What happened then? It wasn't, you know, what did you think of the book or anything like that. (Personal communication [interview], April 15, 2015)

HMD also described this lack of freedom in other aspects of the class.

So in the past seven months, all I've learned about...well, English is really the only class that you learn about writing, and all I've learned about is First Nations poets....Yeah, First Nations poetry. We've learned a few different...what is it? A few different methods

of writing, like characterization and stuff like that, but as soon as we learned one of those things, [the teacher] gives us like three poems that are like First Nations poems that have those characteristics in them....Yeah, so it's definitely not a lot of...freedom in choosing your own poetry. (Personal communication [interview], April 15, 2015)

Petra did not feel that there had been much in the way of experiences with writing in school this year. As she explained, "if there was writing, it was for an essay" (Personal communication [interview], March 24, 2015). This idea that essay writing was the main focus in writing for English language arts was repeated by other students as well. Zach agreed that essay writing was a focus in class.

Yeah, we learned [how to write a paragraph and how to write an essay], I guess, at the beginning of the year this year with [the teacher], but we learned a little bit on like how to format an essay and stuff like that, but I kind of knew that before. (Personal communication, April 22, 2015)

The students seemed disappointed by the limited options for writing in English class; however, they focused on describing what was unavailable to them rather than what might engage them more.

"Once you hit university, you're going to have to write a lot of essays". Despite the fact that students did not seem to enjoy what they were learning in English class, they did express that much of what they learned in school would help them if they wanted to go to university. One student, however, indicated that there were limitations to the use of learning about content as specific as Indigenous poetry, as this would not be helpful unless you wanted to be an Indigenous poet.

Petra's perception was that there would be a lot of essay writing in university. Learning how to write a proper essay in high school would save her from the later embarrassment of not knowing how to do it. Though she believed that other things were important, she returned to the fact that writing is important.

Yeah, [writing's] a good skill because once you hit university, you're going to have to write a lot of essays and I don't know theories...so.... Well, it depends on what you're doing. You don't want to be like, oh, I've never learned this. And it's going to be horrible, so...[if you can't write you may be judged poorly or may not be successful in university]. Maybe. But...you might excel in other things. But writing is important.

(Personal communication [interview], March 24, 2015)

Here, Petra focused upon the importance of writing to be successful and avoid embarrassment at university. If she intends to go to university, this might explain why she also expressed that "most of the stuff I've learned at school is pretty useful" (Petra, personal communication [interview], March 24, 2015). Zach agreed that what he was learning now in school with regard to writing would be useful if he were going to university.

Maybe if you go to, like, university and go to like writing courses, but I'm not sure what else it would be. (Personal communication [interview], April 22, 2015)

Other students indicated that what they were learning in school might have too narrow a focus to be able to be drawn upon more broadly. For example, HMD described how they don't see the way that they could use what they are learning from the Indigenous poetry unit in their life outside of school or after they graduate from high school.

Useful for my life outside of school...not that much really...if I were to, you know, get into First Nations poetry, well, I'm white, so I can't really do that, but if there was people

in my class that were going to get into First Nations poetry, you know, that'd be helpful, but for the one person that may or may not do that, that would be the only thing that's really been helpful for them and everyone else is kind of sitting there thinking about their careers and learning about First Nations stuff. (Personal communication [interview], April 15, 2015)

As for educators, Alex also shared that students who planned to go to university were asking for more support to do academic writing. When Alex asked what the students wanted to do more of with regard to writing, they got the following response:

Some of [the students in the class] wanted to do more poetry, and then a few of them wanted to learn, like, formal essay writing and processes and they're more sort of as, this sounds like a really bad term, but like academically inclined. Like they're wanting to go on to university and they're talking about that already and that's probably where some of that's stemming from, so they know that this is a skill that they're going to need in the future and so they're, they're wanting to work on that now. (Personal communication [interview], April 8, 2015)

Ramone explained that what students consider useful really depends on where they see themselves going after high school. He also believed that this affected how students perceived the relevance of what they were learning in school about writing.

What do they actually consider useful? It all depends on where they want to go....[For example], okay, well someone who wants to go into just a local, you know, sort of like business. I'm already working at X retail store, I'm entrepreneurial, I want to take over the business, this is my goal, they don't necessarily see writing essays or communicating big thoughts as what they want to get better at, and so....They're more engaged [with

writing activities that they see as relevant to that]. They have experience to share with that. It's like, oh yeah, this is what I can do. It's always tough for me as a teacher because I know that the other skills that they would learn from the other writing would help them in this writing that they're doing and so being able to help tie that into them, into their assignment. (Personal communication [interview], April 14, 2015)

“If you use, like, U or B4 for before. I'm like, it's writing not bingo!”. Most of the students emphasized the importance of spelling. They believed they would be judged poorly if they did not spell words correctly and favourably if they had good spelling. Petra was even bothered by the use of numbers and letters to replace words, which is a fairly common practice among adolescents in my experience.

Like that is something that annoys me. If you use, like, U or B4 for before. I'm like, it's writing not bingo! (Personal communication [interview], March 24, 2015).

In her interview, Petra expressed her belief that her intelligence would be questioned if she spelled a word incorrectly. She indicated that people judged other people on the basis of intelligence and incorrect spelling indicated a lack of intelligence.

If you write words wrong for the rest of your life it's like somebody's going to be like, you don't know how to spell this word? It's so easy to spell. And then you might feel bad, so.... Probably [they would judge you poorly if you weren't able to spell something]. Like, it's, most people judge on like smarts and all that, so if you can't write something correctly, then you're kind of lower. (Personal communication [interview], March 24, 2015)

Zach also indicated that correct spelling was especially important for resumes.

Oh, I'm sure for resumes and those things, I'm sure that it affects greatly, if you can write good, then your resume's going to be excellent probably....I'm sure [people would make a judgement if you weren't able to write properly on a resume], yes. (Personal communication, April 22, 2015)

Joseph also described students' emphasis on correct spelling and punctuation as opposed to the content of the writing.

To me, the kids here want – there's a certain irreverence to what they kind of view as something that's not genuine, so...it's...all that academia and all that stuff. I know that's what you want, but cut it out. Tell me what you want me to do, and I'll do it. Whereas the other kids seemed to want to never ever – they wanted to do it perfectly the first time. And what they viewed as perfectly was spelling and punctuation. It had nothing to do with content. (Personal communication [interview], April 14, 2015)

Ramone agreed that spelling was very important to the students. He indicated that correct spelling makes students appear intelligent.

Spelling. I think they do consider spelling or at least being able to have an end product that's correctly spelled right to be useful, it helps them to appear intelligent. That seems to be something that...a theme that comes up if someone can't spell, then they're like, aww...then they're upset with themselves. (Personal communication [interview], April 14, 2015)

Alysha also talked about the importance of what she described as the “precision of language.” The fact that her emphasis moved away slightly from spelling to include an ability to have your words reflect your thoughts accurately was refreshing.

I think, like, grammar and things, precision of language, and like using your words to say exactly what you mean. I think that's really helpful. (Personal communication [interview], April 17, 2015)

I did not expect to learn about the strong commitment the students had toward proper spelling, and I was intrigued to learn more about it. When I was teaching, I did not observe this same commitment to correct spelling; however, the students would often be very focused on the “correct answers.” It was not unusual for students to throw out work if they perceived that it was not correct. This eventually led to me having pencils available in the classroom for students to use, so that they could erase mistakes instead of throwing work out.

“Write fast, get finished it first, make it look amazing”. Based on my experiences teaching in the classroom, students do not enjoy working through a writing process that involves multiple steps. Despite the fact that it can contribute to higher marks and better quality writing, students seemed to resist this process a lot. As I mentioned previously, students seemed to believe that their writing was good enough to get by. If they did not feel confident about their writing, they were reluctant to invest time on preparation or pre-organization to improve their writing. They focused instead on the end product. The students in the study engaged in similar practices. As an aside, the only conflict I had with a student during this study arose in the classroom when I attempted to work with him on organizing his ideas before he began writing.

I had some limited success with students in the study when I did a mini presentation on how to prepare for the written portion of the provincial exam. Because the provincial exam is completed on computer, I discussed how the writing process online differed from other writing processes that they may have engaged with at school. Students seemed to appreciate only having to write an outline (instead of writing a full rough draft) prior to starting their final draft on the

computer. In general, the students in the study, like other students I have worked with, were reluctant to spend much time on a writing process – instead they seemed more focused on getting to an end product in the quickest amount of time possible. In fact, HMD was very blunt about how the final writing piece was achieved.

I actually have a rule for myself writing essays, so this is an easy question. Write fast, get finished it first, make it look amazing....Make sure everything's perfect. [I don't go back over it.] I like do every sentence one at a time. Like, I'll write one, look over it, write one, look over it, write one, look over it. And I'll read, as I'm going to hand it in, I'll just skim it to see if there's any mess ups. [I only do revisions later] when it's worth a lot of marks, otherwise it's just something that I can, you know, get an easy A on. (Personal communication [interview], May 25, 2015)

There were not many steps in Zach's writing process.

Usually, I just brainstorm ideas of what I should write and what kind of topics and just write little notes on the topics I want to write and then expand from there in the bigger.... (Personal communication [interview], May 22, 2015)

Alysha did not brainstorm before beginning to write: her first step was the rough draft.

I'd probably write a rough draft and just like, rough thoughts and kind of how I want to lay out my essay, and then I'd go through and refine it. (Personal communication [interview], May 22, 2015)

Petra did not indicate that a rough draft was necessary, but she included a step for making revisions.

I don't know. Choosing something when you like so many things that you could write about, but once you choose something, you kind of just figure out more about it if you

don't know that much. Then you write about it, then you kind of go over it to see if you missed anything. (Personal communication [interview], May 21, 2015)

Overall, the students seemed to agree that the revision step was necessary in their writing process.

“They enjoy writing when they feel confident about the subject”. One educator observed that students “enjoy writing when they feel confident about the subject” (Ramone, personal communication [interview], April 14, 2015). This comment was reflected in many of the statements made by the students in the study. Most of the students identified free writing as a favourite writing activity because of the freedom that they had to choose their topic. I believe having this freedom also allowed them to choose topics on which they felt most knowledgeable. HMD described that free writing was a favourite for them as well as their classmates.

Free writing was definitely my favourite last year, that was...something that everyone liked....we'd have a writing period and you could write about just about anything you wanted or [the teacher would] give you a topic. Like a general topic like...what did we do last year? We did...what does happiness mean to you? What does sadness mean to you? What does poor mean to you? What does rich mean to you? Stuff like that. So you could write about whatever you want because happiness can be anything from, you know, looking at animals to making a million dollars. Like, really wide open like that. And then when it came for students to need to work on a writing project, they'd have a lot broader scale of what they wanted to do because, you know, they'd already been there and picked their options. (Personal communication [interview], April 15, 2015).

HMD also believed that having more freedom in writing would assist those students who do not like writing to engage.

Now there's some kids that will never like writing, you know, the rebellious ones who will say, well this is stupid, I don't want to do this, blah blah blah blah blah, but I think that if you give a kid the chance to sit down and write about anything they want or, you know, write a song, write a rap, about anything they want, they will enjoy it a lot more and get a lot more into writing than if they were given a project they have to work on.

(Personal communication [interview], April 15, 2015)

Zach's favourite activity was also free writing.

The only thing I like about writing is probably...free writing. Like I like to make up stuff, but that's about all. (Personal communication [interview], April 22, 2015)

Alysha agreed that she too enjoyed more freedom in her writing. However, she clarified that this was not usually the kind of writing that she did in school.

I still like doing poetry and short stories and the freer writing sort of methods, but we do a lot of essays and things like that for projects and all that. (Personal communication [interview], April 17, 2015)

If students do not feel confident about the content of what they are writing or their ability to write, it can create a barrier. Ramone touched upon what can happen for students when they come up against these barriers and emphasized the importance for students to see the worth of writing assignments.

Part of it is seeing the value in the assignments. It's always a challenge as a teacher to be able to help students see that. The other aspect that I see for them seeing the value in it is...sort of a constructed...perspective they have around how they, as a writer, are. And that, like they, it's almost like a road block sometimes. They don't, they won't put something down on paper...until it's perfect and they don't feel like they have the skill to

make it perfect, so they won't put it on paper right away. And I've had some of them express that to me where it's this, you know, this hesitancy to write something down when they know they're not able to do it in the way they want to. (Personal communication [interview], April 14, 2015)

Other educators also brought up this idea that students are reluctant to write because they do not believe they are able to express themselves in the way that they would like as well. This view resonates with my observations in the study as well as my own classroom.

“Beautiful personalized experiences that they were able to share on paper”. Though most of the educators agreed that students did not really enjoy writing, they did have some suggestions about how to engage students with writing. One area that students and educators seemed to agree upon was the importance of students being given the opportunity to write about personal experiences. In an interview with Joseph, he outlined the struggles with writing instruction, then discussed the importance of starting small and supporting students to make personal connections to the material.

You can teach them to write with academic language, but the motivation to do so, is just not there. If they can't relate it to their personal experiences, it's not meaningful to them at all. And then they won't practice it, and if they don't practice it, they'll never be able to do it. Because that's what it takes to be a good writer is practice. So...so I think to answer the question is I think that...their experience writing through school is usually not a very positive experience and most people don't want to do it, there are some cases I think where you know you can really make those connections. And the EFP 10 Resource Guide has very short writing, just little things, less than a paragraph, you know, reader

response charts where you get to make personal responses and I think that that's a really good place to start the kids. (Personal communication [interview], April 16, 2016)

Travis discussed the importance of personal connections and suggested that students are more engaged when educators allow them time to write more freely about what matters to them.

[The free verse poems and journals were] something that just kind of...was in them that they needed some source to get out, you know, like not maybe not counselling, but they needed – it's something that's already there that they're allowed to express, you know. So it's more positive and it's less, like there's less room for criticalness, especially in the way that I marked it. So I think they just needed that opportunity to talk. And they were learning but maybe not as much as that direct instruction, but then at the same time they don't listen to me most of the time when I give direct instruction, so...I think the lack of rules was definitely helpful and just a little bit of guidance, you know like, telling me about a place that was important to them using imagery and things like that seemed to be sort of helpful. (Personal communication [interview], March 30, 2015)

As Travis indicated, giving students the opportunity to write about topics that mattered to them and giving them guidance without criticism was useful for the students. Travis also shared that some of the most successful writing he did with the students was when they had the opportunity to write free verse poetry and were allowed to write about their own lives.

Usually when they are allowed to have sort of some...use their own creativity to come up with the writing. So I found probably the most successful times was when I allowed students to write poems, just free verse poems and they came up with some really, really, kind of beautiful personalized experiences that they were able to share on paper. But just making sure that it's open was really really the important piece in that. Also their journals

have been...have shown stronger writing than – like that’s where they like it. That’s where we have a...not since you were there, but in the past we had a journal writing activity at the beginning of the day, and I would...certain kids you’d have to stop them from writing. But it really seemed to be something that they enjoyed and they looked forward to and it was almost like a venting type space that they were able to...move forward from afterwards. I found it took up so much time that I...there’s so much in the curriculum that you could almost...they would almost be happy to do the entire course writing about their lives, writing about their day. (Personal communication [interview], March 30, 2015)

Joseph agreed that students who struggle with writing are more comfortable when they can draw upon their personal experiences in their writing.

A lot of kids that I’ve run into that have trouble writing...all are more comfortable writing when they’re telling their personal experiences. (Personal communication [interview], April 16, 2015)

Alex also noted that choosing topics that are familiar to students can be helpful.

I feel like I’m often surprised by them though, like, the other day when I gave them, oh yeah, when I gave them the *Absolutely True Diary [of a Part-time Indian]*, like the chapter from the Sherman Alexie book, I think that a lot of them were kind of happy that it was something that they were familiar with and they’d read and they sort of had been able to digest and think about before and so, some of the responses I got for that were, were quite well thought out. And I was very impressed by how focused they were when I gave them that activity and how quiet the room was and how long they worked on it for. (Personal communication [interview], April 8, 2015)

I observed this activity, and I believe that another contributing factor was that the students felt that they were capable of completing the task that was being asked of them. This connects to Joseph's previous observation that starting with smaller, more manageable tasks is an effective way to engage students.

One of the community members also indicated that it is important to support students to see the purpose of the assignment they are being asked to complete.

There always needs to be a purpose for writing and whether that's personal, it's for information, essay writing or whatever. But students need to see a purpose and you need to do the prep before the writing to get the best kind of writing. (Christine, personal communication, March 13, 2015)

Though there are differences between the kinds of writing that students do at home and at school, I believe that the student participants in the study saw value in both. Even though one student described frustration with the limited writing experiences at school, the fact that most of the student participants I interviewed planned to attend university meant that students were more inclined to see the writing that they were learning at school as relevant to their lives and useful for their futures.

Perspectives on Writing at Home and at School: Discussion

The students in the study expressed a preference for the writing activities that they engaged in at home over those from school. In her work with Indigenous adolescents, Elizabeth Noll (1998) noted, "With few exceptions, the adolescents' literacy strengths, cultural knowledge, and richness of expression outside of school are not fully recognized" (p. 229). Based on my conversations with the students and the educators, this also appeared to be the case in this class.

The students and the educators in this study indicated that they felt limited by the writing opportunities available in school; however, they indicated that most of what they were learning at school was useful for their future. It should be noted, that these students all seemed to be heading toward university. I think that it would have been useful to talk to some of the students who did not see themselves attending a postsecondary institution to hear their thoughts on whether the instruction they were receiving was relevant for their lives after school.

I found it promising that students were more willing to write when they felt confident about the subject and that students seemed more engaged when they wrote about personal experiences. Though the study did not proceed in the way that I initially thought that it would, I have reason to believe that writing personal narratives with students is a useful way to teach them how to write. Furthermore, giving students a space to write safely or without criticism appeared to be a way to support them to engage with writing. This would also create a space for students to write about topics on which they felt knowledgeable.

The writing process. I was surprised by the minimal amount of work that students did to write an essay for school. Though I was relieved to learn that most students viewed editing as an important step before handing in their work, I had hoped that more students would see the benefit of organizing their ideas prior to writing a draft.

The success that I had teaching students an alternative writing process could be attributable to several facts: first, it was a writing process that was different than the one that they had seen before; second, it was directly applicable to success on their final exam; and finally, it eliminated the necessity of writing a full draft. I see potential in this approach of direct writing instruction for students.

Chapter 9: English 10 First Peoples



Figure 21. Spring Cedar.³⁰

As an Indigenous educator and researcher, I find the interviews difficult sometimes. When we are talking about English 10 First Peoples, the conversations can quickly become challenging and permeated with negative racial overtones. These are not necessarily the views of the participants but are often based upon what they have observed and experienced. I know that I have asked the participants to be honest about their experiences and views, but sometimes I must find ways to protect myself from their honesty, from the truth of what they have seen and lived.

I know that the course and indeed Indigenous education in British Columbia are fraught with challenges, and I believe that the only way to truly understand these challenges is to attempt to understand the truth that exists beneath all of the stories that we tell ourselves and each other. I am grateful that the participants are so open with me. I am grateful that they willingly share their stories. And later, when I return home, I allow myself to remember my own painful truths

and how they too are reflected in these stories. And I wonder if in understanding the case study, I will come to better understand a part of my own history.

Before continuing, I would like to emphasize that I do not believe that the challenges expressed by these students, educators, and community members are unique to this place or even this time. I believe that in their words, some aspects of a larger, shared experience exist. Based on my own experiences with the difficult places that we go when we are working through racial discrimination, I know that there is always a danger of attempting to distance ourselves in order to absolve ourselves from the uncomfortable roles we may have played in the past or continue to play in the present. I would therefore encourage you to seek the shared experience in the words of these participants and to view these words as an invitation into a very difficult dialogue, one that is imperative for us as educators and as Canadians.

English 10 First Peoples (EFP 10) is a course that was developed to provide opportunities for all students to engage with Indigenous oral tradition, worldviews, and pedagogical practices while still satisfying the grade 10 English language arts program requirement (Ministry of Education, Province of British Columbia, 2010a). The course centres around the First Peoples Principles of Learning which were developed by the First Nations Education Steering Committee (2015):

- Learning ultimately supports the well-being of the self, the family, the community, the land, the spirits, and the ancestors; learning is holistic, reflexive, experiential, and relational (focused on connectedness, on reciprocal relationships, and a sense of place)
- Learning involves recognizing the consequences of one's actions
- Learning involves generational roles and responsibilities

- Learning recognizes the role of indigenous knowledge
- Learning is embedded in memory, history, and story; learning involves patience and time
- Learning requires exploration of one’s identity
- Learning involves recognizing that some knowledge is sacred and only shared with permission and/or in certain situations

These principles of learning “represent an attempt to identify common elements in the varied teaching and learning approaches that prevail within particular First Peoples societies” (Ministry of Education, Province of British Columbia, 2010a, p. 11) and do not fully reflect any approach in a single First Peoples society.

The provincial completion rates indicate that in 2014/2015 approximately 60% of the 315 students assigned a final mark in English 10 First Peoples were of Aboriginal ancestry, whereas approximately 90% of the 42 756 students assigned a final mark in English 10 were of non-Aboriginal ancestry (Ministry of Education, Province of British Columbia, 2015a). The discrepancy in the enrolment is likely attributable to the fact that most schools in British Columbia give the students a choice about which course they would like to take to satisfy the required English language arts 10 requirement for graduation. The low enrolment in English First Peoples courses across the province did not go unnoticed by the Auditor General of British Columbia (2015) who reported that enrolment in these courses “had been very limited” (p. 36).

English 10 First Peoples was designed to meet the learning outcomes for English language arts 10, and therefore there are many similarities between the two courses.

Nevertheless, according to the *English 10 and 11 First Peoples Teacher Resource Guide* (Teacher Resource Guide) there are five ways in which this course differs from English 10: the

course is based entirely upon texts created by First Peoples; incorporates the First Peoples Principles of Learning; emphasizes the importance of oral language and tradition; values First Peoples worldview, culture, and language; and emphasizes the importance of themes, issues, and topics that are important to First Peoples (First Nations Education Steering Committee, 2010).

With the release of The Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada's call to action in 2015, there seems to have been an increase in discussion in the media about how to incorporate Indigenous content and pedagogical practices into our education system (e.g., Brown, 2016; Vowel, 2015). This discussion is likely in response to the following statement:

We call upon the Council of Ministers of Education, Canada to maintain an annual commitment to Aboriginal education issues, including:

- Developing and implementing Kindergarten to Grade Twelve curriculum and learning resources on Aboriginal peoples in Canadian history, and the history and legacy of residential schools.
- Sharing information and best practices on teaching curriculum related to residential schools and Aboriginal history.
- Building student capacity for intercultural understanding, empathy, and mutual respect.
- Identifying teacher-training needs relating to the above. (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015, p. 7)

The English 10 First Peoples course satisfies most of the statements above and mandatory enrolment would appear to satisfy all of the requirements of this segment of the call to action by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada. Currently, the prescribed learning outcomes for English 10³¹ do not meet this segment of the call to action, as there is little

requirement for Indigenous content to be included beyond a statement that “the Ministry of Education is dedicated to ensuring that the cultures and contributions of Aboriginal peoples in BC are reflected in all provincial curricula” (Ministry of Education, Province of British Columbia, 2007, p. 15) and the following prescribed learning outcome:

It is expected that students will read, both collaboratively and independently, to comprehend a variety of literary texts, including

- Literature reflecting a variety of themes, places, and perspectives
- Literature reflecting a variety of prose forms
- Poetry in a variety of narrative and lyric forms
- Significant works of Canadian literature (e.g., the study of plays, short stories, poetry, or novels)
- **Traditional forms from Aboriginal and other cultures**
- Student-generated material [emphasis added]. (Ministry of Education, Province of British Columbia, 2010b, p. 2)

To my knowledge there was no other school in the province where enrolment in English 10 First Peoples was mandatory at the time of the study. In other schools where the course is offered, students can self-select to enrol in the course. Because of the exceptionality of the situation, I wanted to learn more about how the decision to make English 10 First Peoples mandatory came about. According to Michael, an educator, the decision emerged from a desire to legitimize culturally relevant education.

I always felt, yes, culturally relevant education is important, but at the secondary level, it's more important if it's legitimized. It needs to be in the curriculum. So when I was looking at our timetable, and I realized that, why don't we teach English First Peoples

10? And why don't we make it compulsory for every student to do that? And I got a lot of resistance from people. Well, you've got to offer both. And I couldn't understand why. This is Canada. It just didn't make any sense to me, it was so illogical that a Canadian school on Haida Gwaii doesn't have legitimate curriculum that is targeted towards First Nations. So, the short and long of it, Sara, is I just willed it. And I was prepared to put up with the people who came into my office in September, and they did, and wanted to know why I had done this and why their kids couldn't take the regular English program and why I was forcing them to read novels written by First Nations authors. And I would respond, "Well, we force First Nations children to read authors that are Eurocentric. Shakespeare. So why shouldn't our children, your children read Tomson Highway?" So it was an interesting discussion. It was good for me because it just made me stronger and more determined that, no we are going to offer this course. (Personal communication [interview], March 31, 2015)

The decision to require all students to take English 10 First Peoples was made with the students' best interests in mind. However, the resistance to the course does invite the following questions: How might this course have been received if community consultation had occurred? How might this course have been received if the school district had decided to make it a district-wide initiative?

In my conversations with educators and students, it quickly became apparent that there were many misconceptions that were initially held and continue to be held about the English 10 First Peoples course. For example, a few of the students believed that it was a locally developed course, so it did not follow provincial curriculum. A couple of the educators described educating community members about the learning outcomes and the similarities between English 10 and

English 10 First Peoples. This confusion led me to wonder whether the resistance to the course might have been reduced if there had been more public communication about the similarities between learning outcomes for English 10 First Peoples and English 10 prior to making English 10 First Peoples mandatory. As one educator, Travis, suggested, some of the resistance may have been due to these misunderstandings about the course. The hope, if this is the case, is that as more students make their way through the course, the resistance from the students and the community will lessen.

I know that it has been made a big deal within the community, but I don't think that it really should be. Like I think that when people see that it's essentially the same content, but it's just showing First Nations writing pieces instead and doing it through a slightly different lens, it just, it makes sense. It's good teaching practices and getting more people in that are from the community too, which is part of the curriculum, I think it's part of the...you now, it's a good thing in every class, so this just promotes it a little bit more than you would see in a regular English I guess. (Personal communication [interview], March 30, 2015)

As Travis indicated, the course also gets more community members involved, which is viewed as a strength of the course in this case.

It was widely acknowledged that there was pushback from the community regarding the decision to make English 10 First Peoples mandatory; however, there were indications that community members may have held differing viewpoints on the topic. For example, this community member applauded the decision to make the course mandatory for all students, stating it removes any perceptions that the course is being “dumbed-down”³² for Indigenous students:

I think they made the correct decision in having everybody do it, so that [the perception that the course had been “dumbed-down”] would not be in there. And then if a good teacher teaches it, it’ll...good things will happen. (Malcolm, Personal communication [interview], March 13, 2015)

Though my intent in asking about the course was to provide a context for the students in the study, I quickly recognized that the decision to make the course mandatory and even the course itself were sites of tremendous conflict and complexity for all of the participants in the study. For this reason, I have chosen to share some of the perspectives on the course in the hopes of providing more insight into the magnitude of these complexities. These challenges and reflections are particularly relevant as we move toward implementing the calls to action from The Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (2015).

Resistance to English 10 First Peoples

In all of the interviews, the theme of resistance to English 10 First Peoples emerged, whether it was the participant’s own resistance or resistance that had been observed in other students, educators, and/or community members. Though there were also many discussions about the challenges and strengths of the course, I have chosen to discuss these separately to facilitate clarity and understanding. This is a somewhat arbitrary division as the resistance, challenges, and strengths were often entwined into the same conversation, reflecting the complexities of the experiences with English 10 First Peoples. Although it seems that the community resistance is subsiding, the perception of resistance appears to linger for many of the students. Joseph indicated that the pushback from the community and students does not seem to be as overt as it was previously. Nevertheless, he explained there is tension between the two communities that are served by the school.

I don't think [the resistance to English 10 First Peoples has] gone away. And I think that there is some tension between the First Nations community here and the non-First Nations community. And there always has been some tension and there likely will be for a while, so I think that will always feed into it. So you do something like this and there's going to be people who talk, but I think as it becomes normal and that this is what we do... I definitely have not felt any pushback this year. (Personal communication [interview], April 14, 2015)

I believe that it is promising that some of the pushback has subsided and that it is becoming the norm to only offer English 10 First Peoples at the grade 10 level. However, based upon my observations as well as comments from the students in the study, I believe that there continues to be a significant amount of resistance to this course.

Most educators who were interviewed reflected on multiple challenges with the course. Alex said it was difficult to understand the resistance to the course. I can corroborate the fact that the question, "Why do I have to learn about this?" is a common one in connection with this course.

I haven't really had any real specific comments from students, but I have heard that, you know, some students aren't super happy about the fact that they have to take the course, and I did have one student, I asked what could make the course better, and their response was, if we didn't have to learn about First Nations culture all the time, which I, you know, I get on one hand, like sure it's frustrating to be told that you have to take a course, or you know, that it's going to have the, you know, particular subject matter, but...and I was talking about this with [an educator] when I first got here and his response was basically, well you know, that's kind of how all courses are. Like if you're taking

English, like just regular English 10, it's Shakespeare and you don't really have a choice, in, you know, what you're reading in that course either. And so, I don't know, I guess a challenge would be getting, especially non-Indigenous students to understand how it's relevant to them. And I think that challenge, you know, that comes up a lot of times with any course that has Indigenous content. It's like, well, why do I have to learn about this? (Personal communication [interview], April 8, 2015)

In attempting to begin to understand the resistance to the course, I reviewed all of the rationales that the participants shared for the resistance. From this review, several themes emerged: the idea that students were being forced into taking English 10 First Peoples and parents did not have other options for their children; the struggle for students to engage with Indigenous content; the frustration that there were no other cultures or ancestries represented in the course; the desire to be doing what everyone else in the province is doing or what parents had done when they were in school; and the idea that English 10 First Peoples was a “dumbed-down” version of English 10.

“Being forced into this”. Most of the students and staff in this study expressed there was frustration on the part of the community and the students because of the belief that the school was forcing the students to take the course. Specifically, the parents and students did not have a choice about which English course they could take. Ramone described challenges with parents when the decision was first made to have English 10 First Peoples compulsory.

Well, the first year we offered it, I do recall challenges being the parents who said, why is my child taking that course? And...just I guess the challenges associated with parents saying, I should have this right to just drop it and you have to give this [English 10] course.... (Personal communication [interview], April 14, 2015)

As Travis explained, even Indigenous parents and community members were uncomfortable with the perception of being forced to take the course. He described that hearing this reaction from Indigenous parents was an unexpected response to the decision.

Within [the community] certain people [are] saying that they don't think it's, that they feel like we're forcing the kids to learn the First Peoples instead of regular English, so it's really interesting that they, well not they, but some Haida people feel like we're forcing the First Nations lens, which I mean, you could see it from the entire other perspective. I think the title of it maybe does that a little bit. English First Peoples instead of just, you know expecting [the Indigenous content] within English right? (Personal communication [interview], March 30, 2015)

Alysha suggested that it was possible that forcing students into the course resulted in some of the negative racial comments that occurred in the class; however, she also thought that the comments could have been because of the specific students or because the Indigenous content in the course prompted the negative comments.

It's possible [it happens more because it is an Indigenous class], but like, I think those people that do make the racist comments make them just because that's who they are.... But it could be [due to the course] because like they're being forced into this, which might, like aggravate them and stuff. (Personal communication [interview], April 17, 2015)

HMD also expressed frustration at the fact that students did not get to choose to enrol in English

10.

I just don't like that we didn't have an option to go for English 10 regular. You know, I get that it's a small school so, you know, we can't exactly split everything up, but we should have had the option to. (Personal communication [interview], May 11, 2015)

The resistance that was attributed to the lack of choice on the part of the students is interesting, as it is unusual that students have much choice in the courses they take. In British Columbia, graduation requirements mean that students rarely have a lot of choice when it comes to selecting courses. In fact, by the time students in British Columbia reach grade 10, they have had very limited access to course selection; this is particularly true in such a remote location and small school. In grade 8, students choose their Modern Language course, which in this school is either Haida or French, and in this school they also have a set timetable for their Applied Skills courses. In grade 9, they may choose their Modern Language course and Applied Skills courses. For grade 10, their options are reduced because students are required to take Planning 10 for graduation. Prior to the mandatory enrolment in English 10 First Peoples, students did not have a choice about their English language arts requirement for grade 10.

As Joseph described the challenges with the lack of choice, he also pointed out that English 10 First Peoples and English 10 are very similar courses – which most students realize once they have started the course. Nevertheless, many students focused on the lack of choice, which acts as a barrier to the students engaging with the course and the material. That said, Joseph indicated that there were some wonderful conversations that took place once the students were able to move beyond whether or not they should have to take the course.

It's just an English course. All the stuff's written in English, all the books have themes, all the books have conventions of English literature, so you just teach an English course is really what you are doing. The only difference really is that you are dealing with First

Nations authors so the themes are going to be sometimes different and the things that are pointed out...and there's a beautiful phrase in [the novel] *Cibou* that is about how the French missionaries and the French fishermen view the moon, and the language that they use to describe the moon. And I remember that being a very good lesson because we focused on it and you know, let's look at this and what are we saying, and it turned into this kind of great question and answer period where I got to talk about Vygotsky and what language does and how language defines thought and "Do you all think that that's true? Because I think that that's what they're saying here, that the nature of the description that you use for something actually has an effect on the way you think and on what you can think and on your reaction to the world and how you view things. And how empty this character feels at the word moon, which to her means flat disc. Right?" And that was a really good day, but to me it's important that we weren't arguing about whether or not we should do this course or whether it was favourably received or not favourably received, we were doing what we were supposed to be doing. We were dealing with the themes in the books and the language that was used and how it was used.

(Personal communication [interview], April 14, 2015)

From this excerpt, I was able to understand that once educators were able to move beyond some of the initial conflict surrounding the course, the students were able to engage in rich and valuable discussions. My own class observations support this; however, it did seem to require skillful effort and expertise on the part of the educator to guide students beyond their initial positions of resistance.

“Pushing back against the Aboriginal content”. There was an overall reluctance on the part of the participants to discuss the pushback against Indigenous content. This may have been

because the resistance could easily be interpreted as racial discrimination. The discomfort with labeling people as racially discriminatory or racists was consistently present in the interviews, and a few participants made a point of explicitly emphasizing that they were not labeling people as racists. One participant even emailed me following the review of the interview transcript and requested that I remove all references to racism and replace them with other more euphemistic terms. As Joseph explained, even when students objected to the Indigenous content, they did not do so publicly.

The reasons that [the students] gave [for pushing back against the course] were just that they resented being forced to do something that they didn't necessarily want to do. And nobody would come outwardly and say, I'm not interested in the Indian content. I did get that from, from a student or two in private. After there had been behaviour disruptions in the class, and I had to conference with them in my office and they expressed to me that they just weren't interested in it.... (Personal communication [interview], April 16, 2015)

One example of the pushback against the Indigenous content occurred one day when the class was working with a short story by Sherman Alexie. A student expressed frustration about the short story they were reading. Because of the student's frustration in class, I made certain to follow up with them in the interview about their negative reaction to the story. They responded that they wished that the stories did not focus on race as a theme.

Short stories are meant to be short stories, you know? I get that they can be cultural, and culture and race are two very different things. Because if you're talking about culture it'll be like Aboriginal stories, it'll be about some cultural story, you know, like the Raven and the Seed, or like the box and the sun and all that stuff. Or like, from...you know, just stories like that. Or there are stories like race, which are modern day stories about

someone being, oh poor me because of this or poor me because of that. And, I just think that...like the short story we were reading, it was about someone's poor childhood, and I think that if they hadn't based it all about just specifically their race, while still saying this isn't about my race, I'm just throwing out all the sour points, and had based it more around culture or even based it without using culture or race, it would have been a lot better story. And I am just kind of tired of reading stories about people...moping about their race. (Student, personal communication [interview], date masked)

Every educator that I interviewed described resistance that they experienced or observed from the students as a result of the Indigenous content in the course. One student explained that he felt that both Indigenous and non-Indigenous students were tired of the Indigenous content that they had to do in school. However, most educators expressed that they felt that the students were less resistant to the material now after running the course for three years. They believed, for the most part, that students had come to accept that in grade 10 they would be doing English 10 First Peoples.

“Not really any other cultures”. Another source of resistance to the course was the perception that other cultures were not represented in the content. A couple of students described their frustration with the exclusively Haida focus while others conveyed their desire for more diversity in the content of the course. One educator explained that some students stated that they did not have an issue with Indigenous people; rather, they would prefer to have a wider range of Indigenous peoples' perspectives represented in the course.

I've had certain students say that it's not specifically First Peoples that they have an issue with, it's that there's a... That they don't like having it narrowed down to one culture. They'd like it to be more open. And there's also been a bit of...political is not the right

word, like there's been...I feel like it almost feeds a little bit of the racism fire for some students, you know. In comments that they'll make, like in terms of oppression and things like that because there are some concepts that come up like, even in [one of the readings], there were certain concepts that came up that certain kids were quick to kind of start to point the finger at.... Maybe not other students, but they would make really negative comments about First Nations people in general, in terms of being alcoholics or...the abuse rates and things like that. (Educator, personal communication [interview], date masked)

Petra thought that the narrow focus of the course may have been a source of frustration as well as a source for the resistance to the course.

I can kind of see why [there were problems with the course], because we focus a lot around the Haida culture and not really any other cultures that other people might want to focus on. (Personal communication [interview], March 24, 2015)

It was frequently expressed that the focus of the content was too narrow; however, my observations in the classroom contradict this view. During my time in the classroom for the study, the content included Indigenous poets and hip hop artists from across Canada; the work of Sherman Alexie, a Native American author and poet from the United States; the Stolen Generation from Australia; and individual student identity. Aspects of Haida culture were occasionally touched upon in class conversations; however, these were brought up as peripheral examples and were never the main purpose of these discussions. That said, the outcomes of the course do require that educators include local content and perspectives as well as more global perspectives. According to the Integrated Resource Package for English 10 First Peoples,

while the focus of [English First Peoples] courses is primarily on First Peoples voices from British Columbia, it is important that students also have an opportunity to study texts that reflect First Peoples perspectives from elsewhere in Canada and throughout the world. Indeed students should come to recognize the diversity that exists among First Peoples. (Ministry of Education, Province of British Columbia, 2010, p. 13)

“Like what everyone else in the province is learning”. Along with the other misconceptions about the course, some students expressed the belief that the course had been locally developed or was a Board/Authority Authorized (BAA) course. BAA courses are “offered by schools to respond to the local needs of the schools and their communities while providing choice and flexibility for students. BAA courses are authorized by Boards/Authorities according to requirements set by the Ministry of Education” (Ministry of Education, Province of British Columbia, n.d.). Students seemed to believe that they were the only students in the province taking the course and were unaware that English 10 First Peoples had been developed by the Ministry of Education in collaboration with the First Nations Education Steering Committee. This meant that some students expressed that they would like to be learning what everyone else was learning.

I think the people that are First Nations find it interesting and unique that we get to have a whole class dedicated to the First Nations while learning the English skills. But I think some people, I don't want to say racist, but it seems like it sometimes, like they feel that we should be learning about more typical things like what everybody else in the province is learning. (Alysha, personal communication [interview], April 17, 2015)

This sentiment was also expressed by parents who were reported to have questioned what was wrong with the content they had covered when they went to school. These conversations did not

take place publicly nor were they explicit, but as this educator describes, parents did seem to view the change in courses as a slight against their own educational experiences.

We got phone calls from [non-Indigenous] parents as well. And there were questions bandying about and usually quietly and not in the open. Mostly questions about, what's wrong with the stuff that I read when I was in school? Why can't they just do that? I want my kids to have the same experiences that I had. (Joseph, personal communication [interview], April 14, 2015)

Though these parents questioned the decision to teach English 10 First Peoples instead of English 10, they did not explicitly state that they had concerns about the academic rigor of English 10 First Peoples. However, there were others who did.

“Dumbing down English”. Some of the educators discussed the concerns expressed by the community that the English 10 First Peoples course was a “dumbed-down” version of English 10. This is a particularly uncomfortable theme in the resistance to the course; however, I must emphasize that this perspective is not unique to this school. In her reflections on teaching English First Peoples courses, Naryn Searcy (2015) also described similar misconceptions connected with the course, and I too encountered many of these problematic beliefs about the course when I was teaching English 10 First Peoples. The view that it is acceptable to lower academic expectations for Indigenous students has been a recent topic in the media due to the overrepresentation of Indigenous students in remedial programs in British Columbia (CBC, 2016). Furthermore, as the Auditor General of British Columbia (2015) reported:

In the education system, racism can take the form of educators having low expectations for the students based on preconceptions or biases stemming from social attitudes. This is the concept of the *racism of low expectations*, and we were told about it in our interviews

with ministry staff, district staff, and members of Aboriginal communities [emphasis in original]. (p. 37)

In an attempt to counteract this kind of disrespectful and erroneous thinking, Michael chose to use the provincial learning outcomes to demonstrate that the course met the learning outcomes for English language arts 10. He also raised the possibility that the underlying reason for the resistance was the Indigenous content in the course.

There was a concern about the fact that we were dumbing down English 10 and providing a dumbed down English 10, and I had to take considerable amount of time to show [the parents] that the provincial learning objectives were exactly the same for English 10 and English FP. There was no dumbing down; it was just different content. But I really did feel that they just didn't want their children to be exposed to First Nations writers, and First Nations poetry, and First Nations prose. (Personal communication [interview], March 31, 2015)

Another educator described the challenge with parents and the perception that the course was inferior due to its Indigenous content.

We had non-Aboriginal parents saying, I should be allowed to take regular English 10, and we had Aboriginal parents saying, this English 10 is not as good as the other one and you better damn well put my kid in the other one, because that's what I want. And so you have...it came from both sides, and...it took a lot of careful navigation by the administration. (Educator, personal communication [interview], date masked)

The perception that the course is remedial due to its Indigenous content is one that I have heard many times before, and it is particularly difficult to accept that the addition of "First Peoples" to the title of the course can lead to this assumption. As this educator explained, the students

themselves did not necessarily make these judgments; however, this mistaken belief extends far beyond the parents and the local community.

There's sort of this idea that it's the lesser course or that it's easier or...remedial or something like that and I found that...I mean not in speaking with the students in this class, but when I go [off island] and people are like, oh, what are you teaching...on Haida Gwaii? And I tell them about this course, and that's their immediate assumption is like, oh, it's English for Native students who, you know, can't do English in the regular classroom or whatever, or someone was like, oh, does that mean you're teaching like, in like dialect and stuff like that? Like not using proper formal English, just bizarre questions like that and yeah, so I am finding that that's kind of a commonly, a common misconception about the course is just, it's different, it's not really English 10, and I think a lot of that just comes from the fact that people haven't even heard about it before.

(Educator, personal communication [interview], date masked)

As this educator indicated, the students who are enrolled in the course do not hold this belief, and this was a consistent observation among the educators. As many educators expressed, once the students were enrolled in the course, they quickly came to understand that it was very similar to English language arts courses that they had taken previously. Nevertheless, it is important to note that in this community, as elsewhere in British Columbia and Yukon, English 10 First Peoples has come up against much resistance from numerous sources.

The context of this study is incredibly complex. I have attempted to share some of the most relevant challenges here in the hopes that later, the findings can be better understood. However, I recognize that these observations about English 10 First Peoples class are my own. They are based on questions that I asked in response to my attempts to understand the students

and how they are positioned within this context and how they position themselves. What I have shared here has been filtered through my own experiences and may not resonate with yours.

Though I want to believe that the challenges with the course are not rooted in racism, I come away with the thought that as soon as we add “First Peoples” to a course title, we begin to have the conversations about it being “dumbed-down.” I want to find comfort in the fact that some people change their minds once they learn more about the course; however, I remain stuck with the fact that here, as in other places I have lived and worked and studied, it is acceptable to discriminate against Indigenous people.

As much as I want to believe the explanations about how the limited perspective of the course or the exclusion of international Indigenous perspectives influence negative perceptions, I remain trapped with the feeling that these perceptions exist as a racist response to a course, which represents Indigenous perspectives, pedagogies, and stories. How did we decide that these were automatically inferior?

I reflect on the times in my life when I have been in places where Indigenous curriculum has been mandated and how entitled the students feel to express their negative opinions – the ones rooted in racist stereotypes rather than questions that seek to learn more. I feel incredibly discouraged. But I also recognize that is part of why I am here, to challenge the stereotypes that people hold about me and my family and my community, and to ask people what they mean when they say, “But you’re different.”

English 10 First Peoples: Discussion

Based on what the participants shared, I understood that much of the resistance to the course emerged from a lack of consultation with the community. I am not suggesting that the community had to endorse the decision to make English 10 First Peoples compulsory for all

grade 10 students, but informing the community more about the course, how it meets the learning outcomes for English Language Arts 10, and why it was being made mandatory for grade 10 students, may have facilitated the transition. I understand that the school had the right to make the decision; however, I believe that had the school sought the public support of the school district, the resistance may not have been directed solely at the school and the staff who worked there.

Based upon the findings of this research, I understand that each year, the resistance to the course has decreased to the point that this year, the fourth year it has been in place, the resistance has been negligible (Educator, personal communication [interview], date masked). This leads me to believe that the decision to continue to make English 10 First Peoples mandatory has been an effective way to decrease the resistance to the course.

Because mandating Indigenous content can be so overwrought with conflict, I believe that at the very least we need to be clear on our intentions. If the intention is to legitimize Indigenous content and pedagogical practices, as the educator in this study indicated, it makes sense to mandate the curriculum. If, however, the intention is to ensure that all students have opportunities to engage with meaningful Indigenous content and pedagogical practices, we need to ensure that we are introducing the content in ways that allow students to engage with it meaningfully and with the greatest impact. Ideally, we should be able to find ways to achieve both by ensuring that our approach is thoughtful, as we learn more about the groups of people who will be impacted by the decision, and invite their involvement.

Chapter 10: Struggles and Strengths of Teaching English 10 First Peoples



Figure 22. Painted Cedar.³³

I was thrilled to be teaching English 10 First Peoples. I previewed the material the summer before I taught it, and I was so excited to share the course with my students. Although not many students chose to enrol in the course, I believed that my enthusiasm would engage them and the following year word would spread, and there would be more students. I believed that the Indigenous content would ensure their success, because the stories reflected their lives and their experiences. But I struggled to make the course what I envisioned it to be.

The students still skipped class and many of the Indigenous students were not meeting the expectations for the course, as I suspected would also be the case if they were enrolled in English 10. Changing the content was not the silver bullet I had anticipated, and later, when I pored over the Ministry exam results I realized that this was the case across British Columbia as well.

I was disappointed at first, but then I realized that the students who enrolled in the course had an experience at school that I had never had. They had the experience of engaging with quality resources created by Indigenous authors, poets, and directors. They had the experience of being enrolled in a class where the perspectives of Indigenous people were valued. They had the experience of being in a class where they did not need to be ashamed of their ancestry.

In talking with the educators in this study in particular, I came to understand that there were significant challenges with teaching English 10 First Peoples – challenges that the educators worked to overcome because they all believed that the course itself was a strength and that there were many benefits for the students enrolled in the course. Though the educators expressed numerous challenges, they all agreed that the strengths of the course overshadowed the challenges.

Struggles Teaching English 10 First Peoples

Throughout the interviews, educators expressed their challenges with teaching the course as well as difficulties that others had faced teaching the course. The Auditor General of British Columbia (2015) reported similar difficulties in a recent report that referenced “challenges to delivering a curriculum strong in Aboriginal content” (p. 36). It was further reported that “non-Aboriginal teachers may lack the confidence or knowledge to comfortably deliver a curriculum rich in Aboriginal content” (p. 36).

According to the educators, the greatest barrier to teaching English 10 First Peoples was the feeling that non-Indigenous educators might not have the connection with the local Indigenous community to be able to do the course justice. Other concerns included difficulties with the following: obtaining materials to teach the course; becoming familiar with the content of the course; and focusing on the strengths of Indigenous people using the recommended literature.

“I don’t have the connections in the local community”. The educators described not feeling connected enough to the local community to be able to teach the course. As the Teacher Resource Guide indicated, “community resources are an integral part of the EFP classroom. In addition to providing rich learning experiences for students, community resource people are sometimes the only available source of oral texts, a required part of the EFP curriculum” (First Nations Education Steering Committee, 2010, p. 11).

Though the Teacher Resource Guide contains guidelines on how to approach members of the community, it can be a daunting task. This is especially true when educators are uncertain about how to proceed and the focus is to strengthen connections with Indigenous communities. As Joseph shared, it remains a struggle to know how to best approach the material and to know whom to invite into the classroom. Nonetheless, community involvement is still viewed as a necessary component in a course such as English 10 First Peoples.

I kind of think about my previous experiences and wonder whether I should move more quickly or whether I should move more carefully or whether I should move slowly or I should let it happen organically and what do I do? I don’t know. And sometimes the best answer I can think of is just, you know what? Just stop thinking about it too much and just be yourself. But that whole thing creates barriers in me bringing local, the local content into the course because I’ve only been here a few years, I’m not an expert at Haida culture, I’m the wrong person to be teaching Haida culture and I don’t have the connections in the local community to be able to bring those people in. (Personal communication [interview], April 16, 2015)

When educators are not from the community, they feel that they need to gain connections with the community to validate the content they are covering in the class. As Travis shared, another

struggle is trying to find a balance between including the local community in the classroom and respecting the boundaries of students who may wish to keep their home and school lives separate.

I feel like I need to have connections within the community to almost like validate some of the curriculum that I'm teaching and it kind of...it makes it less real when you don't have that connection in the community. So I work really hard to find different volunteers to do different presentations or whatever and then I connect the curriculum that way. And I find when you don't do that, it just seems like you're almost learning about a different world in a lot of ways. But then there has been some resistance to that a little bit with certain kids just feeling like they don't want that in their world as much or they want to learn about something else instead of what's here, right? (Personal communication [interview], March 30, 2015)

Joseph also explained that it is not always easy to engage the community in English 10 First Peoples, and this can be a barrier not only for local educators teaching the course but also for those teaching the course across the province.

I know that my experience [of having difficulty getting local community involvement] is not unique in that regard. And it's exactly that kind of thing that makes teachers shy away from maybe wanting to teach [English 10 First Peoples]. Not here so much, but if there's a problem across the province with people wanting to do it, non-Native teachers teaching this course, that's their issue, I think, is "I don't have the connections in the local First Nations community to make this happen." (Personal communication [interview], April 16, 2015)

According to Jan Hare and Michelle Pidgeon (2011), “Public schools would do well to forge relationships with First Nations communities, drawing on the resources and values within to better serve the learning needs of Aboriginal youth and enhance the curriculum for all students” (p. 106). Furthermore, by including members of the community, educators can gain new and insightful perspectives on the curriculum. However, it is also important that educators manage to find a balance between including local content and ensuring that students feel that they are learning new material consistent with the learning outcomes for the course. In this district, there is often no scope and sequence for the inclusion of local content in courses, and therefore some material may be repeated in multiple courses. As some students shared with me, this repetition of content can be frustrating. Sometimes, the inclusion of local content can validate the experiences that students bring to school; however, it can also have the opposite effect for students. They can view the inclusion of information with which they are already familiar as being unimportant information or not at grade level.

The challenges these educators experienced connecting with the local community are familiar. I have often heard of educators, particularly those of non-Indigenous ancestry, who feel uncomfortable teaching this course and believe that it is not their place to do so. Nevertheless, I would suggest that there are many ways to teach English 10 First Peoples, and that it does not require that the educators be of Indigenous ancestry. As Susan Dion (2007) points out, educators need to

come to recognize themselves as something other than the ‘perfect stranger’ to Aboriginal people and begin to recognise how their own engagements with dominant discourses have informed their understanding contributing to a reproduction of dominant ways of knowing about Aboriginal people. (p. 340)

I do believe it is essential that educators are willing to be authentic in their approach to the material, to recognize their position, and to be candid with the students about their perspectives and experiences. I believe the recognition that students need this course (Davidson, 2015) should always outweigh our own discomfort in teaching it.

“So much...foundational work”. Another challenge that educators faced was the difficulty locating content that was appropriate for the course. Because the course focuses on “the experiences, values, beliefs, and lived realities of First Peoples” (Ministry of Education, Province of British Columbia, 2010a, p. 11), resources are not always immediately available in the schools or school districts where the courses are taught. Furthermore, the lived realities of Indigenous people can be difficult to understand without adequate background knowledge. It becomes easy for students to fall into negative stereotyping if they are not provided with sufficient information about the history of Indigenous people prior to engaging with the material.

As Travis explained, he wanted to focus on some of the more positive aspects of Indigenous people; however, he felt limited by the recommended resources for the course.

One of the biggest challenges with teaching this class was that much of the literature out there discussed the darker aspects of First Nations people, like the effects of colonization and residential schools. While this is important and valid to teach, I was hoping to gear the course towards celebrating the positive aspects of First Nations cultures. We began [by] talking about the current cultural renaissance taking place but then jumped into a novel study *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part Time Indian*, which wasn't as reflective of what I was trying to get across with the kids. This was partially my fault for choosing this book, but I thought the students would like it and connect with it on some

level; however, the content ended up being more tricky to navigate than I originally anticipated. (Personal communication [interview], April 2, 2015)

Alex also reflected on the amount of background knowledge that was required for students to fully understand the material. This was particularly true for the historical content in the course. In my own experience, providing sufficient background information can support students to engage in rich dialogue instead of focusing on negative stereotypes.

I feel like there's so much kind of foundational work that you have to lay before getting to this point and there's so many things in this course that are so important to talk about, like, like a lot of historical content, just to make things sort of, just to put things in context. And so that you're not getting these kind of comments, like, oh, why are we learning about residential schools again? Like, you know, we're so sick of this. (Alex, personal communication [interview], May 19, 2015)

An additional challenge to which Alex alluded was the students' perception that covering material more than once is an inferior instructional practice. This view may be supported by experiences in other courses where reviewing material is an indication that the content has not been grasped. However, the English 10 First Peoples Integrated Resource Package (IRP) recommends the inclusion of First Peoples pedagogical practices. One of these practices is "a willingness to adopt a recursive approach to texts (for example, being willing to revisit the text more than once)" (Ministry of Education, Province of British Columbia, 2010a, p. 13). I have had some success revisiting material when I use it for a different purpose. This provides students a level of confidence with the content, while providing an opportunity to master new skills.

As the educators quickly learned, if sufficient foundational work was not done, the content of the readings could quickly open up conversations that became difficult to manage.

This educator described one such instance:

We read [a short story], and I had kids do predictions on what they thought it would be about, and one of the kids, well a few of the students were talking about...like they would frame it in a really negative way. So you were trying to get across, you know, what [this] has done, but they would frame it as, well this is why all Indians are fat and diabetics now. You know? That's the lens that they would be seeing it from, so you would have to...like to get that empathy, to get that understanding, you can't just show them the material and get it through the material, like you really have to expect all of these, sort of negative comments to come out, and then you have to develop other kinds of material to deal with it, you know? And when you're not really ready for that, it's a lot harder than you expect it to be. And I was actually sort of shocked at how comfortable a number of those students were saying kind of relatively racist things, in front of the class with respect to their views of Native people. (Educator, personal communication [interview], date masked)

As this educator later explained, they did not believe that the students were racist, but rather that the students had predetermined ideas that had come from outside the classroom that were brought into the classroom during these conversations.

I really don't think that any of the students in the class are racist, I just think that they have some preconceived ideas that have come from other sources and still need to be sorted out. Instead it might be more appropriate to say something like "misinformed stereotypes" about First Nations people. The openness of the class seemed to make it

comfortable for non-Native students to discuss their preconceived/present ideas with regards to First Nations people. And this caused a bit of a division in the class amongst non-Native and Native students because most of the First Nations kids and non-First-Nations kids, with other more positive ideas about Native culture, did not seem as comfortable to discuss their perspective. (Educator, personal communication, date masked)

The challenge here was for the educator to effectively facilitate the conversations that were coming up in class. While it could be considered positive that students felt comfortable discussing their concerns, it was difficult to ensure that the Indigenous students felt safe enough to share their views, which may have opposed those of the non-Indigenous students. As this educator went on to explain, this was very difficult to manage in the class, to the point that the educator had to shift the students' focus.

They would make really negative comments about First Nations people in general, in terms of being alcoholics or...the abuse rates and things like that or in terms of things even just like...it was really almost like a...and we haven't seen it as much since you've been there, but partially because I've really shifted what we've been doing, but it almost created a little bit of a feeling in the class and I don't even know how it happened but where the non-First Nations kids were somehow the privileged, which in some ways, I guess are...but you could see some of my kids that were First Nations that are usually really really strong advocating excellent writers, and they'd just kind of sink in their chairs and it would be me that was responding to the students, but it seemed like the voice was really coming out in the non-First Nations kids. (Educator, personal communication [interview], date masked)

Finally, the material for English 10 First Peoples can cover such sensitive topics it requires thorough previewing prior to using it in class.

We had to read [the novels] first ourselves. We had to think about them because some of them are very dark and they reflect the lives the characters in the novels had come from which is unlike what you find in the novels that are taught in the regular English 10 program where everybody's got 2.5 kids and a white picket fence. These were much darker and dealt with serious topics like suicide or the death of a family member or the desecration of a gravesite or the stealing of artifacts, which are not reflected in

Eurocentric literature. (Michael, personal communication [interview], March 31, 2015)

As Michael explained, there are significant differences between the readings for English 10 and English 10 First Peoples, and the material for English 10 First Peoples requires very careful navigation on the part of the educator. When I was teaching the course, I found that I needed to have other alternative readings available for students who may have been unable to emotionally manage the content of some of the readings.

“They haven’t read any of the books”. The Teacher Resource Manual provides lists of recommended resources for the course. It also provides recommended background reading for educators preparing to teach the course. Because the course is relatively new and not always offered, educators may not have had time to review any of the resources in connection with the teaching of other courses. This means that the preparation time will likely be longer than for teaching other courses that have been in the curriculum for a longer time.

They haven’t read any of the books that are in it. Although I think that’s changing, and I know now that some of the teachers on staff have read some of the books, which is one of

the things I thought was important. (Joseph, personal communication [interview], March 14, 2015)

As Joseph indicated, there is value in reviewing these resources. They offer authentic First Peoples voices (Ministry of Education, Province of British Columbia, 2010a) on a range of topics and these perspectives can be included in other curricular areas and/or other English courses.

“A strong background in Indigenous studies, I think prepared me pretty well”. As one might expect, many of the challenges explored here culminated into an observation by a couple of educators that it was difficult to find people who were willing and/or felt comfortable teaching the course. However, one educator expressed feeling completely prepared to teach the course. I found this particularly promising, as there had been so much focus on the challenges with teaching the course.

I guess just having a strong background in Indigenous studies, I think prepared me pretty well for being able to teach this course, and just having read a lot of the books...and just, I guess, having a broad kind of knowledge of the themes of the course, and themes that come up in novels and stuff like that. (Educator, personal communication [interview], date masked)

In this case, this educator believed that formal education and life experiences helped to prepare them for teaching the course. I would also contend that by doing coursework in the area of First Nations Studies, the educator was exposed to much of the literature that is covered in the course which would likely cut down the preparation time. As a final note, it is important to remember that despite all of the resistance and challenges, this course continues to be offered, and for many students, educators, and community members it has been a rich and rewarding experience.

Strengths of English 10 First Peoples

I chose to end this chapter with the strengths of English 10 First Peoples because this follows the progression of the experience for many of the students, parents, and community members. They began with concerns and resistance to the course and eventually most of them changed their views as a result of engaging with the course content or learning outcomes in some way.

Last year, I wrote an article about the importance of including Indigenous content in our curriculum (Davidson, 2015), and many of the strengths that I identified were echoed in the voices of the participants for this study. I believe that the educators and the students recognized that the strengths of the course outweighed the challenges and that, overall, the pushback from the students and the community was reduced each year that the course was offered. The strengths of English 10 First Peoples were its potential impact on Indigenous students whose values and home literacy practices may not align with those at school (e.g., Wilson & Boatright, 2011); the benefit for all students to be exposed to Indigenous content and to understand the difficult history of Indigenous people in Canada; and finally the contemporary relevance of the course.

Despite the promise of this course, it should be noted that Indigenous students are not actually performing better academically in English 10 First Peoples. In 2014/2015 49% of Aboriginal students in English 10 achieved a final mark of C+ or Better compared to 70% of non-Aboriginal students. In English 10 First Peoples, 42% of Aboriginal students achieved a final mark of achieved a final mark of C+ or Better compared to 74% of non-Aboriginal students (Ministry of Education, Province of British Columbia, 2015a). However, as I have argued elsewhere (Davidson, 2015), the positive impact of the course may be more qualitative in nature.

“I would have been more proud of who I was”. The educators I interviewed indicated there was a benefit for Indigenous students to engage with the Indigenous content and pedagogical practices that were part of the course. Furthermore, they explained that much of the other curriculum and content that is covered in school is based upon Eurocentric perspectives and practices, which may not be culturally relevant to students of Indigenous ancestry. Some of the educators believed that English 10 First Peoples was a way to begin to change outcomes for Indigenous students and to create more of a balance with the dominant Eurocentric perspectives in mainstream schools.

With the focus on identity (Ministry of Education, Province of British Columbia, 2010a), English 10 First Peoples lends itself well to the exploration and celebration of diverse identities. Alex reflected that they may have been more proud of their Indigenous ancestry if they had had the opportunity to take the course.

I think I would have been a lot more proud of who I was...and would have wanted, yeah, to acknowledge that part of my identity a lot more. I think...it would have helped me to understand a lot of the stuff I was going through as well. Like seeing it written down on a page is totally different when you're like, wow, this person has been through something so similar, and they've come through it and stuff like that. Yeah, I think that would have made a pretty big difference for me...and having a place to talk about these issues as well.
(Personal communication [interview], April 8, 2015)

Alex also indicated that the course would have provided a place for some of the more complex discussions about being Indigenous in Canada. My own experiences teaching the course support this idea. As a class, we often found ourselves having conversations about many of the challenges that we faced as Indigenous people, particularly in the education system. Because of

my challenges with my own Indigenous identity in school, this theme resonated particularly strongly with me. My own experiences in school reinforced shame about my Indigenous ancestry (Davidson, 2015), and so I believe that I too may have felt differently about my ancestry if I had taken this course when I was in high school.

Travis explained that because well over half of the population of the school identified as being of Indigenous ancestry, Indigenous content should have been reflected in the curriculum. In his view, this would provide a sort of balance for all of the European-based history that is offered in other courses.

The fact that we have English First Peoples 10, it just makes more sense in this building because it...I mean, in terms of even just equity. Like we expect our First Nations kids to take Social Studies for the first few years of their time here and it's all based on European history right? And as is most of the...well not always but the just regular English class, so of course we should have something that reflects something that's a little bit more our culture in the school. (Personal communication [interview], April 2, 2015)

The commitment to increasing the Indigenous content at the school is somewhat supported by Jan Hare and Michelle Pidgeon (2011) who stated that

within educational settings, institutional racism takes form through ethnocentric curriculum and mainstream pedagogies that serve to reinforce the knowledge and experiences of white, middle class learners. Indigenous youth struggle to find relevance in classrooms that make little or no efforts to represent their histories, values, perspectives, and worldviews. (p. 96)

Although this view was clearly held by the educators wishing to work against the perpetuation of institutional racism, the students I interviewed did not openly indicate struggles to find relevance in the curriculum.

“It’s important for everybody to be exposed to Indigenous literatures”. As educators move toward responding to the calls for action set out by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (2015), it makes sense to include Indigenous content in all curricular areas, including English language arts, for all students regardless of their ancestry. This is supported by The Auditor General of British Columbia’s (2015) report that stated that “Aboriginal content in provincial curriculum, particularly content that addresses Aboriginal history, is important for all students” (p. 37). In his discussion of the importance of English 10 First Peoples, Joseph extended this view to articulate that all Canadians need to understand this history in the hopes of reducing racism.

I think that the strength of the course is that...is that it does a really good job presenting materials that express a perspective and a point of view that is important, even if people don’t agree with it, is important for the general population in Canada to at least engage with and understand, and that hasn’t happened. We know that there’s still a lot of racism out there and there’s still a lot of tension and bitterness. And we hear it over and over....

(Personal communication [interview], April 16, 2015)

Though not everyone believed that Indigenous students need Indigenous content, this community member pointed out that it reflects the world that we live in.

I don’t for one moment believe that Aboriginal kids need to have all the stories, have an Aboriginal content, or be written by Aboriginal writers, crock of bullshit. We’re human beings, right? Now, obviously the school system is prejudiced towards or has been

prejudiced towards a more European Eurocentric version of things and that's absolutely true, but...the...we all have to function in the world as it is too, so you can't shut yourself out from it. (Malcolm, personal communication [interview], March 13, 2015)

Ramone also expressed that English 10 First Peoples has been beneficial to the school even though some of the students pushed back against the content.

Sometimes [the students] themselves are like, what's the point? Why are we doing all of this? It seems a bit wishy washy...but I don't think it was really deep seated, it was just sort of more passing. I think that, I think the students, it really benefits them to have...Aboriginal based sort of like novels and resources and like perspective approaches and...so I think it really does help us as a school, to be able to have that. (Personal communication [interview], April 14, 2015)

Alex stated that exposure to authentic Indigenous texts allows students to challenge some of the inaccurate thinking that they may bring into the classroom. It also offers an opportunity to expand their thinking about Indigenous people in Canada.

I think it's important for everybody to be exposed to Indigenous literatures in general and just sort of a more, a broader and more realistic view of Indigenous people, instead of just sort of a single story, you know, or whatever, whatever ideas people bring from home or whatever. (Personal communication [interview], April 8, 2015)

Through the interviews, I learned that the course was a source of pride for the staff at the school. Furthermore, although the decision to make English 10 First Peoples mandatory was unusual, it was applauded by the superintendent of Aboriginal Education.

The course is a strength. I mean you walk into [the school] and you say "Do you have any First Nations curriculum other than the Haida language and culture?" which would be a

given, and we could say, "Yes, we have English 10 First Peoples and we have BCFN 12." In fact...the superintendent of Aboriginal Education visited us last year and was extremely impressed by the fact that we made it compulsory. We were the only school in the province where it was compulsory. Other schools offered it, but kids had a choice. And so you had the First Nations children taking English 10 FP and non-First Nations taking regular English 10. Well, that to me is just...that's just perpetuating the difference. (Michael, personal communication [interview], March 31, 2015)

The comments shared here focus upon the inclusion of Indigenous content; however, the course is also taught using Indigenous pedagogical practices (First Nations Education Steering Committee, 2010; Ministry of Education, Province of British Columbia, 2010a). As I have argued elsewhere (Davidson, 2016), Indigenous pedagogical practices can be tremendously beneficial for all students regardless of their ancestry across all curricular areas.

“I think it’s so relevant”. English 10 First Peoples is fairly new and therefore much of the content can be considered relatively contemporary. Furthermore, the readings and content reflect the life experiences of many Indigenous youth. As this community member explained, the content of the course is relevant for Canadians. They also indicated that there are many experiences of Indigenous peoples in Canada that we do not know about, and this course may serve to change that.

Well, I think it’s so relevant, you know. Even if I didn’t live on Haida Gwaii, if I lived anywhere. We live in Canada, we...I still, like I say, it’s still a mystery to me why we’re still teaching our kids about Shakespeare³⁴, I mean, he’s so passé. You know, I know he was important at the time, but that was 500 years ago....so...yeah, I love the idea. And I love that there’s so many things that happened, that First Nations people experienced that

other Canadians didn't have. Let's learn about it. (Cristo, personal communication [interview], March 26, 2015)

The contemporary nature of the material and the fact that it is not the kind of material that students may have previously seen in their English classes may make the course more engaging for some students. As Alysha indicated, the readings were similar to what she would read for pleasure outside of the school setting.

It's...I don't know, other than [the fact that there's no Shakespeare] it's a really interesting course, 'cause you read a lot of things that you wouldn't normally like look at as something that you'd just kind of read in your leisure time. So that's interesting.... And other cultures too, like we learn about not just like Haida or what's around here, which we'd normally learn about? It's like all the First Nations cultures and stuff, which I think is important because people tend to just throw all the First Nations people in one category and say we're all the same, but there is so much diversity and everything.

(Personal communication [interview], April 17, 2015)

Another point is that Alysha felt that the course helped students to understand that there is a lot of diversity among Indigenous groups in Canada. This diversity is often missed when we consider the Canadian Indigenous identity as singular (Restoule, 2000).

Despite many of the concerns and challenges, all of the educators and most of the students I spoke to viewed the course as a strength. I applaud the courage it took to make English 10 First Peoples mandatory, and I believe that much can be learned from this case with regard to mandating Indigenous content and pedagogical practices. The findings are particularly relevant as we begin to see debates about mandating Indigenous coursework at postsecondary institutions across Canada (e.g., MacDonald, 2016).

Struggles and Strengths of Teaching English 10 First Peoples: Discussion

Though many of the struggles to teach English 10 First Peoples were significant, I felt hopeful that the educators continued to view the course as a strength. I spoke to an educator a year after the study was completed and they informed me that many of the struggles that were outlined in this section had been overcome in the year following the completion of the study. The educator attributed the shift to several factors: continuing to make the course mandatory (there are currently no students in the school who have taken English language arts 10); providing an introduction to the course which included an overview about why it was important for all students to engage with Indigenous content and pedagogical practices as well as commonly-held negative stereotypes about Indigenous people; and an introduction to the classroom teacher which included an overview of their university coursework, including courses in Indigenous studies. This educator was of Indigenous ancestry, and they attributed part of their ability to connect with students to this shared ancestry with many of the students as well as an ability to demonstrate an authentic connection to the course materials (Educator, personal communication [interview], May 25, 2016).

Previously, I found that teacher ancestry did not affect connections between teachers students (Davidson, 2008); however, this educator believed that it made a difference with this particular group of students. The view that Indigenous educators are needed to improve academic achievement for Indigenous students is not unusual (i.e., Bazylak, 2002; Silver, Mallett, Greene, & Simard, 2002); however, I would like to emphasize that other educators of non-Indigenous ancestry have had success teaching this course (e.g., Searcy, 2016) as well as other courses that are rich in Indigenous content and pedagogical practices (e.g., Goulet, 2001).

Chapter 11: Perspectives on Identity and Relationships



Figure 23. Gumboots.³⁵

It never occurred to me that my Indigenous ancestry meant that I was unable to learn. I just thought it was another inaccurate stereotype that people believed about Indigenous people. I think that makes me lucky.

It was not until I was a teacher that I learned that some students believed the reason they were unsuccessful at school or could not learn in the way that they wanted was because of their Indigenous ancestry. It made me angry that the teenage students with whom I worked believed it and that they had gotten away with saying it for as long as they had.

I needed to learn more. I did not want to have these conversations with students. And I never wanted any of them to believe that their options were limited because of their ancestry.

The intersection of identity and relationships may not be immediately apparent; however, I came to this research through my own experiences with ancestry at school as well as my observations of the struggles that my Indigenous students were facing at school. As I mentioned

previously, as a classroom teacher, I had countless conversations with my Indigenous students about how they viewed their ancestry as a barrier to their academic success. However, it was only touched on once in this study. In my classroom, it was not unusual for a student to explain to me that the reason they were not doing well was because of their Indigenous ancestry; therefore, I believed that if I could understand the role of identity in schooling I could better support these students. I also learned from working with these students, that I was able to form stronger relationships with them through writing, particularly in the journals where they would often write personal narratives. From these experiences emerged the idea to create a unit where the connections between these themes could be further explored. I believed that the English 10 First Peoples classroom, with its focus on Indigenous content and identity, was the ideal site to explore these connections.

The findings in this chapter centre around the role of ancestry for participants in school, the relationships that were formed using writing and personal narratives, and the students' and educators' perspectives on the identity unit in the English 10 First Peoples class during the study.

The Role of Ancestry in School

The role of Indigenous ancestry played a significant role in this study, particularly given that the study took place in a class consisting entirely of Indigenous content. In British Columbia, the performance data for Aboriginal students is disaggregated, so that it is easy to track student achievement over time and across curricular areas. The results that became obvious as a result of this disaggregation combined with the experiences I had in the classroom with Indigenous students led me to want to learn more about how students and educators perceived the role of their own ancestry in the school. Once again the students and educators who participated in the study offered a range of perspectives on the role of ancestry in the school. The

perspectives on ancestry and identity were very complex; however, I have attempted to provide an overview to assist in understanding this complexity.

I began by asking all of the participants about their ancestry and allowed them to share what they were comfortable sharing. I also asked them to reflect on whether they believed that their ancestry was represented at school, and if so, how. Consistently, the students indicated that Haida ancestry was represented more than any other ancestry at school; however, educators held a different view. Some of the educators indicated that there was public support for Indigenous and Haida initiatives, and some held the belief that this was not always demonstrated consistently and that it did not continue behind the proverbial closed doors.

When I asked about whether their ancestry was represented at school, HMD, a non-Indigenous student, responded that their ancestry is not represented at the school.

Absolutely not. Not in any way. I actually have a bit of a problem with that.... So what happens is, we take English to First Peoples and in Social Studies we study the First Nations land and all that stuff. But I have never once learned anything about any other area. Like we have learned nothing about China, which was the big industrial age in China. Nothing about that. All we've learned about is...Canada. And I get that that's important, but English to First Peoples and Social Studies being based around First Peoples for an entire year, isn't going to help me if I go on to live in America....I just don't get why my ancestry isn't represented here because I want to know my own history, and I feel like I should be taught it. (Personal communication [interview], April 15, 2015)

This was a source of frustration for HMD, and the tone and volume of their voice during this portion of the interview supports this assertion. Though HMD later indicated that they did not need to learn anything about their history or anyone else's history at school, here they expressed

a desire to learn more about their own history in school. Zach, another non-Indigenous student, also said that his ancestry was not really represented at school, indicating that the ancestry of students who are Haida is represented more at the school.

No, not really. I think...if your ancestry is Haida, they get more, like, I don't know, they represent more at the school, I think. (Personal communication [interview], April 22, 2015)

Zach went on to explain that he believed that the focus should be broadened to include other cultures, and this focus should be extended beyond a single year.

Yeah...well, I think it's important to know about the...Aboriginal people and what they went through and stuff. I also think that we should...just...maybe not just have it as one year of just learning about Aboriginal people. We should learn about all the cultures around the world, I think and not just focus on one for one year. But that's just my thing.... Maybe all cultures so we can just get a taste and get a feel of just like...because I think some people are getting bored of it because...it's just...seems like every year it's kind of all they hear about is Aboriginal people...'cause there's more Aboriginal people than whites here.... (Personal communication [interview], April 22, 2015)

Here, Zach also indicated there is a possibility that some students are losing interest in their courses due to the perception that the only focus is on Indigenous culture. He attributed this focus to the fact that there are more Indigenous people than non-Indigenous people in the school.

Alysha, a student of mixed Haida ancestry indicated that her Haida ancestry is represented at the school, but her other ancestries are ignored. She also described how her Haida ancestry is represented at the school.

I think my Haida ancestry is [represented at the school], but most of my other ancestry is kind of just...like ignored, in a sense. Like, it's recognized and I know that, but it's not shown, like represented like the Haida culture, and stuff is. Our school emblem is a Haida design and...we always have, like cultural events and stuff that pertain to...like the Haida culture and stuff like that. And it's really neat to see and stuff like that, see like other people's culture. Like last year we had a...a plains people come in and dance for us. And that was really cool. So they did like, hoops and stuff. That was really really interesting. And yeah...just other things. In the past my ancestry had been, like mocked, like my [non-Haida] ancestry, but...more now, it's accepted, it's just kind of like who I am and I've stepped into that, and just kind of been more confident with it. (Personal communication [interview], April 17, 2015)

In this school, the Haida students that I interviewed viewed their ancestry as an asset. In my experience, it is unusual that students would view their Indigenous ancestry as being beneficial to them as it is usually viewed as a barrier to education (i.e., Hare & Pidgeon, 2011).

As I indicated previously, the educators held differing views from the students regarding whether their ancestry was represented at the school and whether it played a role in their interactions. In previous research that I conducted in this district, students discussed whether or not they were *identifiably* Indigenous (Davidson, 2008). The students in this study did not discuss this; however, two of the educators indicated that they believed that their own ancestry did not play a role in their interactions with students, as they were not *identifiably* Indigenous. As one educator explained,

I am not like visibly *identifiably* Native, and so I think a lot of the time people just assume I'm white, so I don't, yeah, I guess I just don't...have a lot of people thinking

right off the bat that I'm Native and so I don't get a lot of questions or, you know, things you would expect like that. It hasn't really affected me at the school. (Alex, personal communication [interview], April 8, 2015)

Another educator shared that Haida culture is more publicly valued at the school; however, the distinction was also made between what is said publicly and what may or may not occur behind closed doors.

Yes, definitely [Haida culture is more important than others at the school].... I would say, in terms of people speaking to it, the Haida culture is definitely privileged over the other ones. In terms of maybe the doors shut.... Behind closed doors, perhaps the Haida culture doesn't come out as much in certain classes, but those teachers are at least engaged in the conversation and starting to maybe move in that direction, hopefully. (Educator, personal communication [interview], date masked)

A few of the educators and community members referred to the fact that the school system itself was based upon Euro-Canadian perspectives and values. As this non-Indigenous community member shared, she believed that the school reflects more Euro-Canadian values and practices than local culture. However, she also indicated that this has improved over the years to include more Haida influences.

I certainly feel that the school reflects more of my ancestry than it does of local, or at least it has over the years. But I also feel pretty comfortable that we have an incredible mixture of people here and the school is represented by different nationalities and things, and I just had an experience not too long ago visiting a relative in a suburban school, and I remember thinking, "Oh I just don't know if I appreciate how diverse we are here." You know, especially how, you know the Haida part, you know this island's ancestry is being

more and more visible in school because I have been here since 1975, and certainly then it was not visible, at all. (Christine, personal communication [interview], March 13, 2015)

The views regarding the role of ancestry at the school were somewhat divided, with the students consistently reporting that Haida ancestry was more represented in the school than non-Haida ancestry. The educators and community members held more complex views of how Haida and Euro-Canadian ancestry was represented in the school.

Perspectives on Relationships

The significance of the connections between students and educators in education cannot be underestimated. Every person I interviewed for this study agreed that good relationships were essential to student success. The participants also shared ways they used writing and stories to develop, enhance, and sustain relationships between people. Given the dialogic nature that exists in the act of writing, it is not surprising that it can be used to develop and strengthen relationships in the classroom. Mikhail Bakhtin's notion of dialogic relations (as explored by Shields, 2007) is relevant here, as it emphasizes the possibility of being able to simultaneously engage with a text and with others. Indigenous students are often ostracized from the mainstream educational system (Belgarde, et al., 2009), and yet we know it is the strength of students' relationships with teachers that can determine their academic achievement (Bazylak, 2002). Recognizing the dialogic potential of writing means that it is possible to conceive that it can be used as a way to forge connections between people including students and educators.

In this study, the participants believed that connection between the students and educators was essential to student success. The participants also discussed how they could use writing to effectively communicate with people when talking was not an option. Lastly, the participants

talked about using personal stories and narratives to build relationships and connections with others.

“I think connection is really good for students to have with their teachers”.

Overwhelmingly, educators, students, and community members in the study agreed that establishing and maintaining relationships between the students and educators was necessary for student success. From the students’ perspective, the purpose of these relationships was to ensure that educators knew how to work with students.

I think if a teacher thinks you’re just a run-of-the-mill student, they will never learn how you learn. And if they don’t learn how you learn, they’ll try teaching you just like every other kid. And I’m a very hands-on learner, like I’ve got to write it down and see it or, you know, verbally hear it, instead of just reading it in a book. And a lot of the teachers know that about me...? Whereas if a teacher didn’t know that about me, and just had me read out of a book, you know, I’d be sitting there and not be as smart as I am today.

(HMD, personal communication [interview], April 15, 2015)

Petra confirmed that knowing students meant that teachers would know how the student learns.

Yeah, [it is important for teachers to know their students] because people have different, like, how they learn. People are different like that. So if the teacher knows how this person learns and how this person learns, like it could help do both. (Personal communication [interview], March 24, 2015)

Zach explained that connections are important to facilitate interactions between the student and the educator and to help students build respect.

Yeah, for sure. I think there's...yeah, I think connection is really good for students to have with their teachers, so they can just interact and also respect the teacher too.

(Personal communication [interview], April 22, 2015)

The educators in this study also believed in the importance of building connections with students; however, their interest was more socially focused rather than pedagogically. Joseph explained that educators need to persevere and allow people time to get to know them.

I tell people you don't have to be brilliant, you don't have to be a genius, you don't have to be the best teacher in the world, but you do have to stick it out, so that people know who you are and they trust you. And once they do that, all of a sudden it got easier, it got results. (Personal communication [interview], April 14, 2015)

When educators are working with Indigenous communities, positive interactions between educators and the community are particularly important (Taylor, 1995). As Christine explained, it is important to honour invitations from the communities when you are working to build positive relationships.

It's just like we used to say to teachers, you know it's really important, like you'd be seen say in [the community]. Like people won't say that to you, they won't say, but they'll notice. You know, do you attend events? If you're invited somewhere, do you honour that invitation? Yeah, those are just little things about communities. (Personal communication [interview], March 13, 2015)

Ramone also agreed that educator relationships with the students and community are vital.

[Knowing your students is] essential on some sort of level. Like it depends on the context, but when you're...especially within a community where you know your

community, it's essential to be able to make those connections. (Personal communication [interview], April 14, 2015)

Cristo believed that students do not learn as much without a connection to the teacher.

Absolutely. Absolutely. Because if there's no connection between the student and the teacher, I don't think the student learns as much. (Personal communication [interview], March 26, 2015)

In her work with teachers on effective practices with Aboriginal students, Linda Goulet (2001) learned that building strong relationships with students was integral to success. Therefore, the view that relationships are an important aspect of education was not an unexpected theme; however, I was surprised to hear this perspective expressed so consistently.

“If you can't say something you could just write it down”. Though it was not a dominant theme, some of the participants talked about how writing could be used as a way to connect with others. For example, Christine described how she used letter writing to connect with family that lived far away.

I grew up with people writing letters and people communicating that way, so I think that writing has been really important in our family.... Very much [a way to connect with people]. And it is interesting because I think I said to my brother “Why do I even do this anymore?” You know, the kids aren't responding, sometime. And he said, “No, no, I know they love it, you know when something comes from you.” So sometimes we do need an indication that somebody is reading it or whatever. (Personal communication [interview], March 13, 2015)

Zach agreed that we can form connections with people through writing. He wrote letters regularly to his grandmother who lives far away and explained that we can often say things in writing that we are unable to say in person.

Yeah, I think everyone should learn how to write, yeah, for sure, but...yeah, I do think it's good for everyone to be able to write and just...I don't know, it kind of gives you that connection sometimes, if you don't know what to say in words, you can say it in writing. (Personal communication [interview], April 22, 2015)

Petra agreed that writing can make it easier to communicate.

[It's important to be able to write for] expressing yourself. Like, if you can't say something you could just write it down.... Like, when you're speaking it's like the first thing that comes to mind. You can't really think about it. When you write it, you're like, okay, does this sound harsh or not? (Personal communication [interview], March 24, 2015)

Joseph also described how learning to write essays and reading other people's essays allowed him to understand other people better.

You have to be creative and you have to structure [the essay] in a logical way, almost like a story because you have to take people from the beginning to the end. And if you can do that in an organized way and make it engaging with an engaging writing style, I think that's really good and it's not just good for university and beyond. For me what [learning to write an essay] did was it enabled me to really, really think about what other people were even saying, what other people's values are, and just knowing what other people are trying to say by the argument that they're making. And when I say argument, I don't necessarily mean in a really adversarial way because that's what essay writing is, it's

argument and evidence. But that whole idea that there is bias and it's impossible not to be biased. (Personal communication [interview], April 14, 2015)

I also experienced being able to connect through writing when my students wrote journals. Often they would share stories with me in that context that they likely would not have shared in conversations.

“Trading stories back and forth about things that had happened in our lives”.

Before the students began writing their narrative essays, as part of the identity unit, the classroom teacher shared a narrative essay that they had written. The students all agreed that hearing their teacher's narrative essay had helped them to feel more connected with the teacher. As Alysha explained, it “gave [her] an insight into where [the teacher] is in a sense” (Personal communication [interview], May 22, 2015). Zach was also greatly impacted by the depth of the story that their teacher had shared.

I thought it was, well, pretty impacting for all of us. That takes a pretty big role to share something that deep pretty much. And that [the teacher] trusted us, which was pretty...is very amazing that [they] did....Yeah, it did [help me feel more connected to them]. And it helped me just, just know where [they're] at. [They] can just...I think some people kind of blew [them] off because [they] just came in and [they're] a young teacher and [the students] can take advantage of that, but after [they] showed us that, like, what [they do] and [they really care] about this, then it kind of brought it on a different level and a wider perspective. (Personal communication [interview], May 25, 2015)

HMD said that they were amazed by the fact that the teacher took the time to create an example of the project to share with the students.

I thought that was actually really, really amazing that [the teacher] shared that. I was wowed that a teacher took the time out of [their] day to do the same project that the students did. I thought that was a really amazing way to get the students geared up for doing it.... [Some students seemed intimidated by the quality of the teacher's writing, but] they were going to come up with some kind of excuse or some reason why they couldn't write it anyway, but it inspired a few students.... I definitely had a lot more respect for [them] as a teacher after that. (Personal communication [interview], May 25, 2015)

Though HMD focused upon the fact that the teacher had taken the time to write a narrative essay to share with the class, the other students focused upon the fact that the teacher had shared such a significant aspect of their life with them. Connecting through personal narratives can be a powerful experience. As Alex reflected, they had a memorable experience sharing stories with students, and it brought them closer together.

I was working upstairs with a few of them who just weren't getting anywhere, and, and we ended up just kind of trading stories back and forth about things that had happened in our lives to try and get them thinking about something that they could write about and they were super engaged and asking all these questions and then sharing their own stories of, you know, making connections of, you know, things that had happened with them and sharing those stories and, yeah, I don't think that would have happened if we hadn't done this unit, so that was nice. (Personal communication [interview], June 2, 2015)

Perspectives on the Identity Unit

As I mentioned previously, the purpose of the unit was to provide a framework to explore the answers to my initial research questions: How can identity texts be used to enrich the writing

process? How can narrative writing be used to strengthen student writing? How can narrative writing support students' identity explorations? I was hopeful that the unit would provide students the opportunity to think about their identities and experiences more deeply before being interviewed. As Alex explained, the students were more engaged with this unit than was first anticipated.

They seem excited about [the identity texts that they're working on now]...I mean I don't know what the level of engagement [was before, but].... I've been impressed with their level of focus, because I really, especially from what I had observed, like I really didn't know if they could sit still and listen to something for half an hour or read a whole chapter and answer questions about it. Like I just had no idea where they were at with that. So the fact that they have been, for the most part, most of them have been able to do that, is...is good. (Personal communication [interview], April 8, 2015)

“It made you think about how to represent you in pictures”. Jim Cummins and Margaret Early (2011) spoke of the value of identity texts to assist students in gaining a positive reaction from others in response to aspects of their identity that may have previously been a source of shame or discomfort. Furthermore, they suggested that these texts can open up intergenerational dialogues in both their creation and sharing. Based on my positive experiences creating an identity text (LeBlanc, Davidson, Ryu, & Irwin, 2015), I believed that students might experience similar benefits from creating their own identity texts. Furthermore, I hoped it would provide them alternative ways to explore their identities.

In her work with a group of grade 7 and 8 students, Rania Mizra (2011) found that she was able to use identity texts to enable students to “see themselves in the curriculum” (p. 115). She also believed that working with the identity texts helped to transform her previously silent

and silenced students into students who were “empowered and engaged, active, alive” (p. 118). In her view, the creation of these texts allowed her to support her students’ exploration into their own heritages and to develop relationships with other students on that basis, thus using the identity texts to affirm their identities. I was hopeful that I could achieve similar results with the students in the study.

One advantage to including the use of multimodal identity texts in this research is that they do not hold the same historical association with assimilation that writing does (White-Kaulaity, 2007). In their work with an Indigenous adolescent, Amy Wilson and Michael Boatright (2011) observed that “to offset some of the tensions and contradictions associated with using this mode [writing] he used it with other modes as well” (p. 272).

Many students in this study initially had difficulty with the creation of the identity text. I had anticipated this because of the experiences I had in my own classroom where students struggled to use images to represent ideas. For many of the students with whom I have worked, it was difficult to move from concrete ideas to more abstract ones. In my classroom, this meant that we needed to work through the concept of symbolism prior to engaging in these kinds of activities. I found that in this English 10 First Peoples class, the students required support to understand the project. Initially, the students seemed confused about being asked to do an assignment in English class that did not involve writing. Nevertheless, once they realized that it really did not involve writing, the students engaged in ways that led me to believe that writing might have been a barrier for some student engagement. In the end, most of them seemed to find the activity engaging and enjoyable. Alysha explained that it was a good way to explore the topic of identity once she understood what she had to do.

I thought...[creating the identity text] was interesting, because I hadn't done anything like it before, so it was kind of hard for me to understand what I was supposed to do. But it was, I thought it was a good way to introduce, like, the whole topic of identity because it made you think about how to represent you in pictures. (Personal communication [interview], April 17, 2015)

Zach said that he enjoyed working with the images. He also believed that the other students enjoyed the activity as well.

I thought the art project was a little bit more engaging for me at least, because I got to share what I liked and just, I don't know, just, you know, like I said last time, pictures are worth a thousand words, so I really liked that part of the...[project].... I did pictures of what I liked and pictures, I guess like...I wouldn't say, what made me who I am, because that would be like, I would need like childhood photos, but...stuff that I liked and stuff that.... I thought it was way more engaging [to do that].... I thought [the students around me] all loved it. They did. It wasn't...I guess, too hard. They didn't have to think much, they just had to see what they really liked and just...put it into pictures. (Personal communication, May 25, 2015)

Petra found it difficult at first, but then she was able to understand what was being asked of her and became able to do the assignment.

It was difficult to find stuff at first [for the identity text], but then it's like, oh, I got this now. Just trying to find pictures to describe everything in one section is kind of difficult. (Personal communication [interview], May 21, 2015)

Alysha liked having the opportunity to do something that she really enjoyed, and she appreciated being able to combine it with her writing. She also explained that her friends struggled with the task initially, but they were able to engage once they understood how to proceed.

I really liked [working on the identity text] because it gave me a chance to do photography because that's something that I'm interested in and use it as a way to express my writing in pictures.... I found around in my friends they had a bit of trouble trying to figure [the identity text] out, and I did too at first, like trying to figure out what exactly we were supposed to do, but I think...I'm not exactly sure what my friends actually did for their projects, but I think they enjoyed it too. (Personal communication [interview], May 22, 2015)

Alex, an educator, had the impression that the students were very engaged with this project. Though the students on the computers may have taken a bit longer to focus, they too engaged in ways that Alex did not expect. Alex also commented on the fact that some of the students really surprised them.

I think the [students] who were not working on computers seemed very engaged and more sort of...creative with their, like with what they were doing. And then, I'd say, I don't know, the ones who were using computers, I think it took them a while also to sort of figure out what they were doing really. And once it was explained to them, they were just sort of looking for images that, of things that they enjoyed doing, or that, you know, represented something about their lives or whatever. They were really quick to look pictures up and put things together and I was surprised at a few of them, like [one student] who often isn't engaged at all made a whole power point presentation, even like words at the bottom describing each image.... Yeah, which I just wasn't expecting out of

him at all. And he was, you know, really kind of, I mean you know his attitude was sort of like he didn't think that it was anything special or whatever, and he was like, oh yeah, look at my power point, you know, whatever. And I did, and I was just kind of blown away by it. So, yeah, I think the level of engagement was actually pretty decent.

(Personal communication [interview], June 2, 2015)

“When it relates to you, you have all the details”. Most of the students that I interviewed expressed that they preferred the narrative essay writing to other writing they had done in class. However, one of the students expressed more neutrally that they “write narratively a lot anyway.” (HMD, personal communication [interview], May 25, 2015). For Alysha it was initially difficult to write narratively because she had not previously written in this way. After she understood how to do it, she really enjoyed it. It is worth noting that she was the student who expressed that she liked writing essays even prior to writing the narrative essay.

I found [the narrative writing] was a little bit difficult because I've written lots of factual essays and like persuasive essays, and stuff like that but I'd never written a narrative so it was kind of hard to grasp, but after I kind of figured it out, I really liked it.... I found it really fun. Like, I don't know, if I had other homework, I'd find myself doing my [narrative] essay more than I'd do my other homework because there was just something that...it was more personal and it's kind of like something you connected with.... My friends in particular liked it because...one friend in particular liked it because it was...a different way of writing I guess. Like she struggled with it at first, but then once she kind of figured it out, she had a really good essay. (Personal communication [interview], May 22, 2015)

Petra found writing essays challenging because the assigned topics were not usually related to her. She said that her writing was stronger when the topic was one that related to her.

I think with a regular essay, since you have a topic and it doesn't really relate to you, it's kind of difficult, but when it relates to you, you have all the details and you actually know what went on.... Usually the essays we have are about old historic stuff that happened in the past and it's like, do I really have to write about this? Like, you're not passionate about it. But when you're passionate about it, it's like okay, I've got this.

(Personal communication [interview], May 21, 2015)

Zach, who does not like writing, explained that he found it easier to write about himself than to write about topics that he does not know much about.

Well, [writing narratively] made it easier writing about yourself, but it wasn't...it definitely was more engaging because when you just write, like an essay about anything, I feel that's harder to talk about, harder to put down in words I guess than if it's your own personal story....I think [the other students in the class] were nervous to share what, like their stories and what they felt and stuff, but all in all I think everyone was doing a great job and actually buckling down. It was hard for some people, but I think they got over it.

(Personal communication [interview], May 25, 2015)

As Zack explained here, he believed that it was difficult for some of the students in his class; however, they eventually wrote some strong pieces.

Because I was interested in student engagement, I asked how many assignments the teacher received from the students during this unit. According to Alex, the number of students who handed in their essays remained the same as for other assignments; however, the students

were continuing to work on the narrative essay even after the deadline. Furthermore, the work was of better quality than Alex had anticipated.

I've got about half of the [narrative essays handed in. About the same as for any other assignment].... And I did feel kind of bad just kind of having to kind of cut it off and say, okay, we're not working on this in class anymore, but...but a few of them I know are still working on them and they periodically kind of show me their work, and it's very exciting. And they're actually writing very well, like, [one student], for instance, who the whole time was saying, oh, I don't know how to write an essay, I just hate English because I don't know how to write. She's writing this really great narrative about something that's really sort of, something that's really important to her, and super descriptive and it's just a great story and I'm really enjoying seeing it as it's sort of progressing, and it's really exciting that she's still working on it even though we're not doing it in class. (Personal communication [interview], June 2, 2015)

As Alex described here, a student who said she did not know how to write, wrote something that impressed Alex. What holds promise is that the quality of work had improved and some of the students who had not been previously handing in assignments were able to hand in material with this assignment.

Overall, [the quality of writing is better] for sure. Yeah, yeah, and especially the students who I haven't seen produce much work over the course of the semester. The fact that they were able to write a full narrative and they were some of the ones who handed them in first too, which was like, just amazing. And yeah...the quality of work was a lot higher than I was expecting. And then, you know, when I would give them feedback, they went

back and revised really quickly and were happy about it. (Alex, personal communication [interview], June 2, 2015)

The fact that students were continuing to revise and work on their essays in ways that other educators stated they had previously been unwilling to do was particularly encouraging given their reluctance to engage in extended writing processes.

“They were a bit more guarded than they would have been”. The unit was designed to occur near the end of the year after the relationship between the classroom teacher and the students had developed; however, with the changeover in classroom teachers, the students were not as familiar with the new classroom teacher when the unit took place. The new classroom teacher described this as a challenge when they considered the success of the unit. However, as Alex indicated, overall the unit helped them to develop more connections with the students.

I think [the challenge was] not knowing the students as well as I would have liked to, like if, I think doing this, this unit in whatever it was, March, April, May, it’s probably good timing in the year, but if I had started with them in September and been able to sort of work up to this point instead of sort of jumping in and then being like, okay we’re going to talk about ourselves was, was a little challenging and I think them not knowing me and sort of where I was coming from...maybe they were a bit more guarded than they would have been. I don’t know. It’s hard for me to say really, but they definitely I think at this point they’re coming up to me and telling me all these stories about their lives now, at this point in the semester so it’s...it’s interesting to see that shift. (Personal communication [interview], June 2, 2015)

Racism

In Jan Hare and Michelle Pidgeon's (2011) work with Indigenous youth and schooling, a clear theme of racism emerged. As they explained,

Overwhelmingly, the youth reported their experiences with racism and discrimination while attending public high schools. Racism, both personal and systemic, emerged as a theme across their narratives as they reflected on their experiences with public schooling. The types of experiences [sic] they discussed were negative attitudes and stereotypes directed toward them by non-Aboriginal peers and teachers and an unwelcoming school environment. (pp. 99-100)

My findings differed slightly from these, as the Indigenous students actually reported benefits associated with their ancestry. However, the students and educators did report clear instances of racial discrimination that occurred in the classroom and community. As a result, the theme of racism emerged very clearly entwined with many of the other themes. Initially, I separated these excerpts into a category called "racism"; however later, it became apparent that it might be more accurate to include the aspects of racism throughout the findings. I hoped that this would allow readers to see the words of the participants and draw their own conclusions.

One reader suggested that this decision did not do enough to highlight the racism inherent in this course and in my research; however, my Indigenous ancestry played a significant role in making this decision. As an Indigenous woman, I expect to be positioned in a way that would anticipate my highlighting aspects of racism in my data and therefore such observations could be discounted. Though I rarely address racism directly in my commentary, I hope that readers do not miss the discrimination that exists in many of these conversations, despite the efforts of many participants to mask it.

As I was working through the final edits of this dissertation, I was contacted by an educator who had participated in the study. They had been thinking about my question regarding whether they felt their ancestry was represented at the school. At the time, they had believed that it was, but in this communication they indicated this was no longer the case. As the 2015/2016 school year came to an end, the school district decided to discontinue a French Immersion program in one of the schools. This opened up conversations between community members, district staff, and school trustees that resulted in deep divisions between many members of the Haida and non-Haida communities (Educator, personal communication [interview], June 29, 2016). These divisions can be particularly difficult for the many individuals who identify with multiple ancestries or both sides of such a decision. The work required to achieve peace in communities that have a destructive history of racist agendas is ongoing. When balance has been achieved, we must remember that it is precarious and must be cared for accordingly. Decisions that can open up potentially-damaging conversations must be contemplated carefully and the appropriate supports should be put in place to ensure the understanding and mutual respect in the community can be preserved if not strengthened.

Perspectives on Identity and Relationships: Discussion

Though I do not believe that I truly found ways to support students to stop viewing their ancestry as a barrier to their success, I do continue to believe the conversations invited by the English 10 First Peoples course affords students the opportunity to explore some of the negative beliefs they may hold about Indigenous people and become more informed about the roots of those beliefs.

Even though I was not surprised by the fact that everyone believed that relationships between educators and students are significant, I was pleased that it was such a strongly held

view, and I am excited by the evidence that supports the possibility to connect with students through stories and personal narratives.

I believe that the unit was a success; however, I would like to further explore the connection between art and writing. Because of the scheduling challenges, I do not believe that we were able to fully explore this in this study.

Part IV: Becoming *k'aad 'aww*



Figure 24. Sara Florence Davidson performing *k'aad 'aww*. Photograph by Pardeep Singh. Used with permission.

When I asked my father

*about how the giant Dogfish Mother mask
became a part of our dance,
he told me about the giant supernatural beings
that used to inhabit Haida Gwaii.*

*And he explained that the giant Dogfish Mother mask
signified our continued connection
to these ancient supernatural beings.*

*And then he told me a story that he heard from his tsinnii
about a giant supernatural crab
and a giant supernatural halibut
and the epic battle
that took place all over Haida Gwaii
and finally came to an end
in Naden Harbour
when the giant halibut munched the giant crab
into tiny pieces.*

*And my father told me
that his tsinnii had told him
that this was the reason
there were now crabs in Naden Harbour.*

*And I wonder if
those supernatural beings still exist
and hide among the ordinary beings
that share the earth with us.*

*And I wonder if
our dance is a reminder
that within each shark
there is a part of the giant Dogfish Mother
who continues to live on
in each one of us.*



Figure 25. Ocean Treasure.³⁶

Chapter 12: “If not you, then who...?”



Figure 26. Tidal Pools.³⁷

A few months into my data collection, I felt like I had learned so much through my observations and interviews. But as I reviewed my initial questions, I quickly realized that I was no closer to answering them than I had been when I started my research. I began to panic a bit, so I sought the advice of a friend who is also a mentor and educational researcher. She listened while I described my struggle to answer my research questions. But instead of giving me the answer I was so desperately seeking, she asked me, “If not you, then who?” Then she added, “Your family is from here, you have lived and worked here, you share ancestry with these students, you know the course, you know the school district...if you cannot answer these questions then who can?”³⁸

During this time, I also sought the advice of one of my supervisors who redirected me to focus on the journey and what I was learning. He suggested that there was an interesting

narrative to be explored about an Indigenous researcher seeking these answers while facing the challenges of doing research in a small, remote community. He explained that a research proposal is where we describe what we intend to find out, and the dissertation is where we describe what we actually learned.

These conversations pushed me to examine the journey of my research. They guided me to look at the methodology I had used to seek answers to my questions. They also forced me to slow down and be more attentive to the practice of my research and the teachings that emerged from the experience of engaging in the research process. In their own way, both of these individuals helped me to reflect on my experiences as an Indigenous researcher working in a remote community to better understand the experiences of a group of students enrolled in an English 10 First Peoples class.

As I reflect back upon the complete research journey, I realize that there are some aspects of what I learned during the process of doing the research that I want to emphasize with regard to ethical considerations, using case study methodology, the importance of a holistic perspective, gathering data, and the role of stories in my life.

Ethical Considerations

Prior to beginning this study, I did not realize the extent of my own commitment to ethics while doing research. One of the first steps in this realization happened long before I entered the classroom. Working through the task of completing the application for the UBC Behavioural Research Ethics Board was an intensive yet informative process, as it allowed me to fully reflect on how I intended to conduct this study from the beginning to the end. As a result of the process, I realized I was committed to holding myself accountable to a much more rigorous level of ethical conduct than was being asked of me in the online submission forms. Throughout the

study, I worked to achieve this higher standard by ensuring that I followed the requirements set out by the UBC Behavioural Ethics Board and then enriched them using the Indigenous storywork principles (Archibald, 2008). I am aware that adhering to these more stringent ethical protocols was, at times, restrictive and compromised my ability to share some of the more salient aspects of my research; however, my strongest commitment was to ensuring that I was respecting the confidentiality and protecting the well-being of the participants in this study.

Following the completion of the study, I presented my research to the Haida Education Council. During this presentation, I recommended that the council consider using the Indigenous storywork principles as a framework when considering future applications for research in the school district. Though I found tremendous value in using all seven of these principles in research and would recommend this more comprehensive approach, I strongly advised that the council ensure that the first four Indigenous storywork principles (respect, responsibility, reverence, reciprocity) were satisfactorily addressed in each research proposal that was under consideration. I also recommended that the council look for evidence that the researchers submitting the proposals had demonstrated indications of a holistic approach to their research.

Throughout this study, I was committed to conducting myself ethically at every opportunity; however, I faced some challenges about how to best proceed when it came to inviting participation in the study and when I tried to determine the best way to mask the identities of the participants from this small community.

Student participation. I made the decision not to approach students, educators, and community members directly or individually to participate in the study because I believed that this could be construed as coercion, particularly when working with students. In my experience, when I have lived and worked as an educator in Indigenous communities, the expectation is that

community members will be invited to participate and that they will be compensated for their time. Because I was not financially compensating the students for their time, I did not feel comfortable offering compensation to the educators and community members. By inviting groups of people to participate in the study, I was not following the local practice of inviting people to participate individually. I believe that my decision was the most ethical; however, I believe that if I had invited people to participate I would have been able to include a more diverse group of participants in the study. I wish that I had been able to find a more effective balance between local protocols and my commitment to ensuring that I was not coercing the student participants.

Another challenge with regard to student participation in this study was gaining ethical approval from parents for students to participate. Many more students expressed interest in the study and completed the assent form to participate in the study than actually participated. This was not because parents were unwilling to give consent; rather the students who expressed an interest in participating either forgot to get the forms signed by their parents or forgot the forms at school. It is possible that some of the students felt disparaged by the fact that their parents had to sign off on their involvement. If I were to do a similar study in the future, I would investigate the possibility of seeking parental permission on the phone once I had received assent from the student to participate and their permission to contact their parents on their behalf.

I may have been able to address the problems of student participation and adult permission by providing an incentive for students to participate, but I was unwilling to engage in what I thought could be considered coercion. Because of my focus on ensuring that students' participation was entirely voluntary, I lost sight of the fact that in my experience adolescents do not usually want to openly demonstrate engagement in school-based tasks – which might have

been the case if they participated without compensation. The fact that most students were comfortable talking to me in the classroom and in the community leads me to believe that if I had also been able to find a way to invite the students to participate in a way that did not publicize their engagement with a school task, I may have heard from a wider range of students. In a past study, students were motivated to participate because they could be excused from a class to be interviewed (Davidson, 2008), and I mistakenly believed this would also be the case in this study.

During my time in the classroom, I spoke to some of the students about how I could have increased their involvement in the study. A few of them expressed interest in communicating with me through applications such as Snapchat and ask.fm. Based on their enthusiasm when they suggested these options, I believe that this may have worked well for them. However, there would have been no way to maintain confidentiality using these methods.

Initially all of the students who agreed to participate in the interviews enjoyed writing. It was only after I explicitly stated that I was interested in talking to students that did not like writing that the fourth student volunteered. I realize now that I could have been more open with students from the very beginning to indicate that I was very interested in talking to students who did not like writing. In this case, I made the incorrect assumption that the students would automatically know that I was eager to speak to them regardless of how they felt about writing.

Masking identities. It is particularly challenging to maintain the confidentiality of participants in a small community, which is why it was a very high priority in this study. For this reason, I worked to adopt the perspective of a student in the class or an educator in the school while I reviewed the interview excerpts that would be included in the dissertation to ensure that I masked or removed any identifying information that they contained. I was careful to remove the

pseudonyms and interview dates from sensitive excerpts of interview material, and I invited all of the participants to review the interview excerpts that would be used in the dissertation. I returned this material to the participants upon request to ensure that they were comfortable with the material that was being included. I also adopted the use of collective stories (Richardson, 1988; Marsden, 2005) to focus the readers on the larger polyphonic story being told by all of the participants together rather than on the personal stories being told by individuals.

Case Study Methodology

As I mentioned previously, when I began this study it was my intention to follow Robert Stake's (1995) case study methodology; however, as I worked through his methodology I recognized that I wanted more guidance with regard to the ethical framework and data analysis. That is, I wanted to be able to align these with my upbringing and understandings of Haida protocols of respect. In my desire to achieve this, I decided to extend the work of Robert Stake with the work of Jo-ann Archibald as well as my own understandings of respectful ways to engage in data analysis. I believe that drawing on the case study methodology, the Indigenous perspectives, and the ethical framework strengthened my research.

Responsive research. Robert Stake's (1995) approach to case study permits the researcher to respond to situations as they emerge throughout the research process. By adopting this method, I was better able to gather data that were originally outside of the scope of the study. By drawing on the strengths of multiple approaches to research, I was able to ensure that I could respond to the needs of the participants and the community where I conducted my research in the same way that I was able to respond to the unexpected challenges of doing this research.

Context of the Study

The context of the study became a very significant aspect of the findings. Context was addressed in Chapter 4, and the findings that related to context were addressed in Part III: The Song of *k'aad 'aww*. Another consideration within the context that has not been discussed previously, is the potential impact of educator turnover and absences.

Educator turnover and absences. During the four months that I was in the classroom, there was a changeover from the first classroom teacher to the second classroom teacher, and there were five different substitute teachers who covered one or more classes. (In my experience, it is not unusual to have a higher number of teacher absences in rural and remote schools. Medical appointments or professional development opportunities that might take an afternoon or a day in larger centres can take multiple days in locations where community members must travel by ferry or plane to arrive at their destinations. Furthermore, if teachers are coaching sports teams, it can take up to a week of travel to attend off-island tournaments depending on the location and the ferry schedule.) Because this school operated on a linear system, classes only occurred 2-3 times per week. The number of different educators working in the classroom significantly affected the atmosphere of the class and seemed to make it challenging to develop consistency in the class. During the study, it also meant that the classroom teacher had difficulty establishing the level of trust that they believed was necessary to work through a unit that covered such personal content.

The turnover and absences also meant that I was the only adult in the classroom who was familiar with the routines and the ongoing student assignments. I was unable to remain uninvolved when the substitute teachers requested my assistance. Though I did my best to

maintain my presence as a researcher, I believe that this was one of the ways that students were reminded that I was also an educator.

The Importance of a Holistic Perspective

Throughout this study, I adopted a holistic view. This means that while I was working to understand the beliefs and perspectives of the cohort of grade 10 students, I also worked to understand the context in which they existed. This contextual information made a significant contribution to my findings, and I believe that adopting this holistic view of the research meant that I was better able to learn from the richness of the contextual information that the participants provided in the interviews.

The holistic perspective that I drew upon throughout my study was also demonstrated by the inclusion of my own reflections on my positionality and role as a researcher. According to Margaret Kovach (2009),

indicators that [a] holistic epistemology is present include explicit reference to personal preparations involving motivations, inward knowing, observation, and the variety of ways that the researcher can relate her own process undertaken in the research. Another way to assess process is to see the inclusion of story and narrative by both researcher and research participant. (pp. 34-35)

I had not previously considered the inclusion of my reflections in this research to be an aspect of a holistic perspective; however, I now recognize this to be so. These reflections on my role in the research have allowed the deeper understandings of the implications of this methodology to emerge.

Data Sources

The richest source of data for this study was the interviews. However, I believe that the identity texts and narrative essays could have been very valuable to provide additional information about the experiences of the students and to expand on some of their perspectives.

Written narratives and identity texts. All four of the students who participated in the interviews gave me permission to review and include their narrative essays in my dissertation, so I have reason to believe that the students were comfortable with me reviewing their work; however, none of the students forwarded them to me. I believe that this was simply due to the inconvenience of having to locate and then forward an assignment that they had already submitted to the classroom teacher. In future studies of this nature, I would ask the students' permission to get copies of the assignments (and inform them they could revoke this decision at any time), including the identity texts, from the classroom teacher directly.

Data Analysis

Finding the best way to do the data analysis was a tremendous challenge. As I indicated previously, I wanted to find a way to do my data analysis that was consistent with the teachings of *k'aad 'aww* and the ethical framework that I followed. As I searched for the story to guide the reader through my process, I remembered a conversation I had with my father in his studio about the changes in the dance for *k'aad 'aww* that had happened over the years. From that time, I knew that the story of how he first learned the song and the iterations of the dance that followed would be significant in my research, but I did not know how. I held the story in my mind and trusted that its purpose would become clear to me.

When I began to write about the process of my data analysis, I realized that the stages followed the iterations of the dance. It was another example of the synergy in this work. I am

grateful for the encouragement I received to follow the dogfish mother for my data analysis. I now understand that part of following an Indigenous framework is ensuring that every aspect of the research is consistent with our intentions. Though initially I valued the findings of my research more than the way in which I engaged in the analysis, I came to realize that every aspect of our research provides us with an opportunity for more learning. As Jo-ann Archibald (2008) reminded us, we must slow down and live with the stories. I believe that taking the time to understand my process for data analysis did just that. Furthermore, it afforded me yet another chance to understand the vital role of my ethical framework in my work.

Naming a Methodology

In one of my final meetings with my committee, I was asked what I would call this methodology. I did not have an immediate answer. Instead, I reflected aloud on what I understood about my study and how I had come to learn the title of the dissertation. I reflected that in doing this research, I had learned from the performance of the shark dance that I was following the song of *k'aad 'aww*; however, the name did not come to me then.

A name is a very significant aspect of Haida culture, and there are extensive protocols and ceremonies connected to the giving and receiving of names. As Marianne Boelscher (1989) explained, “among the Haida, names are of prime importance in expressing the social and political order, and in linking the social order to both the supernatural and the material world” (p. 152). Though there are no known protocols for naming research methodologies, I took this question of naming the methodology very seriously and wanted to ensure that my actions were in line with those of my ancestors and did not show disrespect for their practices for bestowing names.

The next morning, as I ran along the side of the road in the rain, the answer came to me. This methodology is the dogfish mother methodology. Though I understand the significance of using the Haida language in my research as a way to honour my Haida ancestors, I recognize too that I have Euro-Canadian ancestors that I wish to honour in my work. The dogfish mother is an unmistakably Haida crest which honours my Haida ancestry. The language that I use to describe it honours my Euro-Canadian ancestry.

I have chosen a name for this methodology; however, I recognize that I do not own it nor do I feel that I have created it. In the same way that the Elders recognize a new ceremony as one that they have not seen in a long time (Davidson & Steltzer, 1994), I have come to believe that this methodology has been remembered from a collective history. As J. J. Baker and L. M. M. H. Baker (2010) explained, “Many of us have been severed from our roots and forgotten the deep sense of relation with our ancestors, the planet, and the cosmos, that have characterized human experience for millennia” (p. 98). However, I agree with my father that those connections still exist even though they may have grown dormant over time (Davidson & Davidson, 2016). In his view,

sometimes when you do something, it has a connection to the past that you didn’t even know about. I feel we are all connected to the past by a thin thread. And when we come together as a group, then those threads become a thick rope. (Davidson & Steltzer, 1994, p. 99)

I believe that remembering and writing about this methodology is my contribution to the strengthening of the rope that connects us to the knowledge of our ancestors. It is my way of honouring the teachings of my parents and their parents before them.

Chapter 13: “The alphabet is the doorway to the other side...”



Figure 27. Alphabet Drawing.

When my father is teaching people about Haida art, he often begins with a story about his realization that Haida art is made up of an alphabet. Instead of vowels and consonants, it is made up of ovoids and U shapes. When he explains this, he shows a photograph of a drawing that I did when I was three years old (see Figure 27). He says that when I drew it, I explained to him that, “the alphabet is the doorway to the other side...”

Decades later as I began writing my dissertation, I attended a talk that my father gave. I listened to him tell this story again, and I realized that my research was really about this very same idea. I still believe that literacy is the doorway to the other side – the doorway that gives us choices in our lives and empowers us. And I sat down to write, I wondered if I would be able to say in 200-odd pages, what I had managed to say so eloquently and concisely at age three.

Reflections on the Research

I have always believed in the capacity for literacy to transform lives. Whether it was through my own experiences writing poetry and prose in a purple spiral-bound notebook, or when I saw the triumph in a student's eyes as she read her first essay aloud to me, or as I read and responded to the stories of my students' lives in journals long after they had left my classroom, I have always known that writing has the capacity to improve our lives, and maybe even save them. With this belief in mind, I began this journey toward understanding how educators can better support students to express themselves in writing and to explore their identities. Now, to fully complete this journey, I must also share with you the contributions, limitations, implications, and applications of this research as well as future directions for research in this area.

Contributions of the research. As I completed this research, my focus was upon how it would contribute to the lives of the people in the local community; however, I recognize that it also makes contributions to the educational community and the research community.

Local community. From the very beginning, the contributions to the local community were a priority. This began with me ensuring that my questions aligned with the Aboriginal Education Enhancement Agreement (School District 55 (Pacific Sound), 2012a) and the Achievement Contract (School District 55 (Pacific Sound), 2012b). The findings from mainstream educational studies are not always applicable to this school district, located in such a unique and remote place. However, because this research was conducted in the school district, the findings are completely relevant and immediately applicable here. Though this district is already recognized for its achievements in Indigenous education, I believe that the findings from this research have the potential to continue to improve the learning experiences for all students.

When I presented this research to the Haida Education Council, I was able to share it with them as an example of respectful research practices as well as highlighting an ethical framework that could be used to review the future proposals from researchers hoping to conduct research on Haida Gwaii. As one of the trustees from the Board of Education suggested, this ethical framework can be used to develop policy for the school district and used by other local agencies who must review requests to conduct research on the islands.

Educational community. Despite the fact that the graduation rates for Aboriginal students have improved, and the achievement gap between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students is narrowing (Auditor General of British Columbia, 2015), the needs of Indigenous students are still not being met by mainstream schooling practices. Currently, there is very little research in the area of Indigenous adolescent literacy (Belgarde, et al., 2009) despite the fact that it is clearly needed. As the audit of the education of Aboriginal students in British Columbia public schools indicated, “more in-depth analysis would help the ministry understand why Aboriginal students have poorer outcomes in some contexts and better outcomes in others” (Auditor General of British Columbia, 2015, p. 6). This research provides some preliminary ideas about achievement for Indigenous students, particularly in the area of literacy education and Indigenous course content. More broadly, I believe that the work we do to understand how to better support Indigenous students will improve academic achievement for all students.

Research community. This study provides a model of ethical research practices with an Indigenous community and illustrates ways in which Indigenous and non-Indigenous research methodologies can be used together to strengthen a research study. This study also operationalizes some of the theoretical ideas that have been touched on by Indigenous scholars (i.e., Kovach, 2009; Wilson, 2008). My decision to draw upon Indigenous and non-Indigenous

methodologies was rooted in a desire to explore the strengths of both methodologies. This research became an illustration of how they can be used together synergistically to conduct research that is respectful and responsive. This is particularly useful for newer researchers wishing to learn more about how Indigenous methodologies and perspectives may be taken up in educational research.

Limitations of the research. For a variety of reasons, this study was different than the one I had imagined it would be.

- The students who volunteered to participate in the study were all capable of writing and would not be considered to be struggling with literacy. Furthermore, the students who participated in the study did not represent the diversity in the classroom with regard to engagement, classroom conduct, and achievement³⁹ levels.
- I was unable to gain access to the student assignments, so I did not have a sense of the kinds of work that the students were producing as a result of this unit.
- Because of the interruptions in the class, there was a long period of time between when the students completed the identity texts and when they completed their narrative essays. This resulted in a disconnect between the tasks for many of the students, and they did not seem to view them as complementary tasks.
- I was restricted in my ability to share all of the findings because of the fact that I needed to maintain the confidentiality of the participants in the study. That said, I believe that the findings are still relevant and useful for educators working with adolescents, particularly those of Indigenous ancestry.

Implications and applications of the research. The results of this study are immediately applicable to educators in the local community, as I have written above; further, I

believe that there are applications beyond this localized context. The findings from the first three sections (Community and home perspectives on literacy and writing; Perspectives on student writing; Perspectives on writing at home and at school) are relevant to literacy educators. The fourth and fifth sections (English 10 First Peoples and The struggles and strengths of teaching English 10 First Peoples) are relevant to language arts educators in British Columbia as well as educators who are implementing courses rich in Indigenous content and pedagogical practices. The sixth section (Perspectives on identity and relationships) is relevant to all educators who work with adolescents.

Community and home perspectives on literacy and writing. It was evident that the student participants in this study felt that their families supported and encouraged them in writing. Though the perspectives on how the community viewed literacy were mixed, there were still indications that overall the community was supportive and that this may have had a positive impact on student achievement at school. The positive impact of community support on student achievement aligns with the view that “involving parents and families in a range of programs, including family literacy,...supports the development of the children’s literacy during their school years” (Chodkiewicz et al., 2008). With this in mind, I believe that it is important that we continue as schools to invite and encourage community involvement, so that we become authentic partners in education (Dunn, 2001; Goulet, 2001).

One community member shared a story about how her grandfather considered her aunt lazy when she spent time reading. As Marlinda White-Kaulaity (2007) explained, “Native American culture demands that people be involved with activities with tangible, practical, and visible results. Reading and writing are not considered to be such activities” (p. 561). Though it was not a widely held perspective, such examples suggest that community members may hold

different views with regard to the value of literacy activities. We must therefore understand and accept the possibility that our efforts, as educators, to support literacy achievement may not be universally seen as a positive endeavour (Swanson, 2003; White-Kaulaity, 2007). As such, it may also be useful to include the perceived benefits of literacy achievement as part of literacy instruction in some communities.

The fact that the negative stereotype of the “dumb Indian” continues to persist means that we need to be aware of how Indigenous ancestry may connect with perceptions of academic limitations for some students. This is especially relevant for educators who may be inadvertently reinforcing the racism of low expectations (Auditor General of British Columbia, 2015) and is particularly important in the wake of the introduction of the new curriculum which includes Indigenous perspectives and content across all grade levels and curricular areas (Ministry of Education, Province of British Columbia, 2015c).

Perspectives on student writing. The students’ perspectives on writing and the educators’ beliefs about the students’ perspectives on writing did not overlap; therefore, it may be useful to learn more about the kind of writing that interests adolescents. It was also evident from this study, that writing has the capacity to transform lives – this was very clearly stated by the student who indicated that they would not be alive without writing. I believe we need to provide a wider range of writing activities in our classes so that we can encourage students to find the kinds of writing that they enjoy. These experiences may provide students with some of the benefits that the students in this study described.

Perspectives on writing at home and at school. Overall, the students in the study expressed a preference for the kinds of writing that they did at home. With regard to their school-based writing practices, they felt their options were limited; however, they appreciated having

choices about topics, opportunities to write from their own experiences, or opportunities to write on topics about which they were knowledgeable. This suggests that we may need to expand our views on how students are engaging with writing at school. We also need to explore how to provide them with safe spaces to write that are free from criticism.

It was surprising to learn that all of the students felt that what they were learning at school was relevant to their lives outside of school; however, most of the students indicated that they would be pursuing postsecondary education. This speaks to the importance of knowing students' future goals, to ensure that the literacy instruction can support them, as it seems more likely they will be able to engage with the material when they see its relevance (i.e., Pirbhai-Illich, 2010).

Lastly, the students in the study included very few steps in their own writing processes, with little emphasis on planning their work. The students in the class seemed unwilling to engage with writing processes that involved multiple steps. I have seen the benefits of planning in the quality of writing, and I had some success with students when I made some suggestions for online composition. Therefore, I believe that we need to provide students with opportunities to explore a range of writing processes that may suit their need for efficient ways to organize their ideas prior to writing.

English 10 First Peoples. A large part of the resistance to the course was in response to being forced to take it. Other sources of resistance were the belief that there was too much Aboriginal content and that no other cultures were represented. The fact that the students were eventually more receptive to the course once they were in the class suggests that we need to work to find ways to demonstrate to the students the benefits and the value of enrolling in such a course. The fact that the resistance to the course has lessened over time suggests that when we

are implementing such changes, it is important to remain committed for a period of time to allow the changes to become normalized.

Another concern that emerged with regard to the course was the desire to be doing the same curriculum as other students across British Columbia. Though this desire was based upon the erroneous belief that English 10 First Peoples was a Board/Authority Authorized course, it speaks to the desire of adolescents to be doing the same things as everyone else. With the new curriculum being released by the Ministry of Education, British Columbia, it seems likely that this resistance will be diffused, as all students across the province will be engaging with Indigenous content.

Many of the comments and concerns regarding the English 10 First Peoples course could be considered racially discriminatory; however, the participants were reluctant to label people as racists. This unwillingness to acknowledge the racism present in these conversations hinders the important dialogues that educators need to be having about the challenges associated with implementing Indigenous content. We must find ways to move beyond these limitations and consider the implications of racism and its potential impact on the academic achievement of Indigenous students (Castagno & Brayboy, 2008; Hare & Pidgeon, 2011). Finally, it is imperative that students and community members understand that courses that include Indigenous content and pedagogical practices are *not* inferior to other courses.

The struggles and strengths of teaching English 10 First Peoples. It was evident from the interviews that educators need more support when it comes to working with courses that are rich in Indigenous content. This challenge was also discussed in the report by the Auditor General of British Columbia (2015), which recommended that “professional development could strengthen teacher confidence” (p. 36). I agree with this recommendation and suggest that we

consider an approach similar to that of Alberta where professional development is being offered to all educators in the province about the history of Indigenous people in Canada (French, 2016). The educators in the study also expressed the struggle to make connections with the local community, which emphasizes the importance of finding ways to support educators to make these connections.

As I mentioned in Chapter 10, an educator from the study successfully worked to overcome many of the struggles that were outlined in this study in the year following the completion of my data collection. The educator attributed their success to the following factors: ensuring that students understood the relevance of English 10 First Peoples to their lives; including a brief summary of the educator's background and the coursework that they had taken that prepared them to teach the course in the introduction to the course; and the school's commitment to continuing to make the course mandatory, despite pushback from the community and the school. I believe that all of these recommendations are worth continuing to pursue, particularly with classes that are rich in Indigenous content.

Though the students did not comment on this, the educators indicated that they believed in the importance of English 10 First Peoples. Specifically, one educator discussed how they believed their life would have been improved if they had taken the course. These findings support the direction taken by the Ministry of Education, British Columbia with the introduction of the new curriculum; that is, with the inclusion of Indigenous content and pedagogical practices across curricular areas and grade levels.

Perspectives on identity and relationships. Regardless of their ancestry, the students in the study believed that Haida ancestry was well-represented and sometimes over-represented at the school. This contrasted with the views of educators who indicated that because the school

system was based upon Eurocentric values, that Haida ancestry was not represented enough at the school. These differences between how adolescents and adults understand representation of ancestry may have implications for how we ensure that Indigenous adolescents feel a sense of belonging at school.

The overwhelming recognition of the importance of developing connections between students and teachers supports the findings of Darryl Bazylak (2002) and Linda Goulet (2001). It indicates that we need to continue to encourage and strengthen these relationships through writing and stories (as discussed in Chapter 11) and also more conventional means, such as taking time to learn about students' interests, experiences, families, and communities.

Finally, despite the fact that the identity unit was not taught in the way that I had anticipated, I still found some evidence to suggest that it was successful for many of the students based on the quality of their writing and the level of their engagement. As identity texts seemed to reach a different group of students who had not previously engaged, I would encourage educators to investigate the use of identity texts in their pre-writing activities and narrative writing as a way to teach the writing process and to explore adolescent identities (Moje & Luke, 2009).

Future research. I answered many questions with this research, including some that emerged throughout the study; however, other questions surfaced as the study progressed and they remain unanswered. These are beyond the scope of this study, so I took note of them as areas for future research. Some of them are included here.

English First Peoples courses across the province. I would like to learn more about how English First Peoples courses are being received across the province. This would provide a basis of comparison for the findings from this study, and it could provide the opportunity to mask

some of the data from this study. This could provide the opportunity for further findings from this study to be shared. Included, would be an investigation into how the course is being introduced and the potential impact of the course being mandated.

Following the completion of this study, another school in the district made English 10 First Peoples mandatory. This decision could provide an opportunity to learn more. I would also like to follow up on this study to learn about how making some of the suggested changes to the course and its implementation influence perceptions about it.

Other contexts where Indigenous content is being mandated. At the postsecondary level, many institutions across the country have recently made the decision to make Indigenous classes mandatory (MacDonald, 2015; MacDonald, 2016); examining these could provide insight into whether some of the challenges faced by the educators, students, and community in this study are similar to those faced at the postsecondary level. If so, it would be a good idea to share possible solutions.

Strengthening the connection between the identity text and the narrative essay. In this study, the time between when the students finished their identity texts and when they began writing their narrative essays was substantial enough that the students did not recognize them as connected activities. This meant that it was difficult to learn whether the creation of identity texts had an impact on writing the narrative essays beyond anecdotal comments about enjoying the activity. By repeating the study without this gap, it would be easier to understand the potential influence of the creation identity texts on narrative writing.

Exploring connections to youth literacies. The findings from this study are primarily based upon conventional, school-based literacy practices in a rural setting. However, more recent work in the area of adolescent literacy focuses upon youth literacies (Rogers, Winters, LaMonde,

2015). I would like to explore how these more recent understandings of adolescent literacy could apply in rural schools and communities such as the one in this study and how Indigenous youth in rural settings use digital, arts, and media literacies (Moje & Luke, 2009) to connect with the social and cultural worlds they inhabit (Rogers, et al., 2015).

Becoming *k'aad 'aww*

Every living culture is in the process of transformation: the form of that transformation varies according to time, space, and the people involved with it. In fact, the very presence of researchers transforms culture, whether they come from within the culture, taking on new roles as academic researchers, or as outsiders, working to approach a 'Native's point of view.' (Haig-Brown & Archibald, 1996, p. 247)

When I planned this research, I believed that it would be a simple case study; however, as I began the study, I quickly recognized that the case study methodology did not provide sufficient guidance to do the kind of research that I wanted to do. It was then that I turned to my Indigenous ancestry for the enrichment that I was looking for.

Though I have experienced some of the benefits of existing in multiple worlds, I have spent a lot of time feeling that I needed to prove the strengths of Indigenous perspectives because of the deficit views that surround me. Doing this research was one of the first occasions when I truly understood the invaluable contributions that my Indigenous ancestry could make to my work, and it was one of the first times that I was able to draw upon my Indigenous ancestry without feeling that I needed to prove its worthiness. I was particularly empowered by the significance of stories.

The significance of stories. Indigenous children learn through stories (Thomas, 2005), and as I reflected on my strengthening connection to Indigenous methods of research, I also

came to understand the significant role of stories in my life. In doing so, I understood the truth in Robina Anne Thomas' (2005) observation that "...storytelling enables us to keep the teachings of our Ancestors, culture, and tradition alive throughout the entire research process" (p. 242).

It was not until I began to write this dissertation that I realized the significant role that stories have played in my understanding of the world. I have always used stories to transmit knowledge to my students, and I have used personal narratives as a way to form connections with them. However, I now understand that I also use stories to make meaning from my life and my experiences, and I recognize that the stories we tell as part of our research become our teachers as well. One of my greatest challenges in writing this dissertation was finding the right story to illustrate my ideas. This meant that occasionally I had to be patient and wait for the story to reveal itself.

The significance of research methodologies. Through this research, I have come to understand that the kind of methodology that we practice does not protect us against our mistakes. We need to find a methodology that allows us to be our authentic selves – that is, an extension of who we are as a researcher and a human being so that we can “always think the highest thought” (Cajete, as cited in Archibald, 2008, p. 12) and conduct ourselves accordingly. We can continue to measure our decisions against the various ethical checklists, but in the end we are truly accountable to ourselves and only we know whether we have behaved in a way that honours our history and our upbringing.

My uncle taught me how to do the shark dance properly, but ultimately when I am dancing at a feast or a potlatch, it is up to me to ensure that I am doing it correctly – that I am honouring the dance and the song that emerged from that dogfish mother on the beach so long ago. And as I move through the water, I am guided by the drumbeat but not defined by it. I follow

the song, but it is up to me to fully understand the practices that I choose to draw upon, so that when it comes time to improvise, I can do so from a place of knowledge and understanding and respect.

I now understand that each dance, like each story, is unique. Each dancer and each witness brings their own experiences and history to the dance. During the performance, the dancer and the witness engage in a dialogue. But when the song ends, the dialogue continues.

I have shared with you what I have learned, but it is my hope that these stories continue to live. In the same way that our songs and our dances continue to adapt and change, I hope that you will continue to engage in dialogue with these stories.

A final lesson. As I worked to further understand the teachings of the dogfish mother, I contacted my father to ask him about her supernatural qualities. In this conversation, my father explained to me that when we enter the worlds of the supernatural beings, we see them in their human form (R. Davidson, personal communication, June 25, 2016). From this fragment of a story, emerged a final lesson from *k'aad 'aww*: When we exist in the world of research and academia, we must remember to see the humanness in our participants. While we continue our work away from them we must hold onto their human qualities so that we treat them with the reverence and respect that they deserve. And as we move even further away from their world to return to our own, we must remember to listen for the echoes of their stories so that we can remain alert for the new teachings that they will bring to us. In the words of Celia Haig-Brown and Jo-ann Archibald (1996),

in the conventions of First Nations storytelling, the listener must make the meaning s/he can of what s/he hears. In addition, the story is often heard several times; each time the

listener has the opportunity for a new ‘reading,’ new sense making. (Haig-Brown & Archibald, 1996, p. 246)



There is a story that my father tells when we are about to perform the shark dance. It is about a man who went out to the beach at low tide to “take care of nature,” and he heard an unusual sound. When he followed it, he came upon a dogfish mother who had been caught on the outgoing tide. She was in her last throes of life, and her chant was like nothing he had ever heard before. The man memorized her song before returning her to the ocean, and it evolved to become the shark dance that we perform today.

When I was learning to perform the dance, my uncle would watch me. He said I must never move in exact time to the drum, as we did for other dances. He said it compromised the fluidity of the dance and removed the illusion that I was moving through water. Instead, I was supposed to sway back and forth on my own, occasionally moving more quickly as I fought a small current.

There were no rules about when to quicken my movements; they had to be improvised.

Endnotes

¹ The Haida word for “Iron people.”

² The Haida word for “grandmother.”

³ Because I recognize the reason for my selection of some of the images may not be immediately apparent, I have included explanations in the endnotes about why I selected some of the less obvious images. I selected the image in Figure 1 to represent the multiple identities that I bring to this work.

⁴ *k'aad 'aww* translates from Haida into dogfish mother or shark. According to my father, these terms hold the same meaning and can be used interchangeably. However, for the purpose of this paper, I will be using the term dogfish mother to refer to the dogfish mother that was initially found on the beach as well as the larger mask that represents the supernatural being. The term shark refers to the smaller masks used in the dance.

⁵ I selected the image in Figure 3 to represent the reflections that are described in the poem.

⁶ I selected the image in Figure 4 to represent the place where I imagined a dogfish mother might get caught on the outgoing tide.

⁷ Throughout this dissertation, I have used italics for excerpts that consist of more reflective material and personal narratives.

⁸ I have chosen to use the full names or initials (based on how the authors identified themselves) to identify the scholars whose work I have drawn upon to complete this research. This is to demonstrate the tremendous respect I have for their significant contributions to my work.

⁹ The pronouns used for participants in this study are based upon the pseudonyms they selected. If the participant chose to be identified by initials or a pseudonym that is conventionally gender-neutral, then the pronouns “they,” “them,” and “their” have been used in the singular form.

¹⁰ I have used the term Indigenous in this dissertation to reflect current changes in Canada from the use of the word Aboriginal to the use of the word Indigenous (Joseph, 2016) when referring to the First People of Canada. The exception is when I am referring to data from the Ministry of Education, Province of British Columbia because they disaggregate into Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal categories based on whether students self-identify as Aboriginal or not. References to the findings of the Auditor General of British Columbia (2015) have also used the term Aboriginal.

¹¹ The Haida word for “sit down.”

¹² I selected the image in Figure 7 to represent a moment when I learned from the place I was in. That day, when I was struggling with my writing, I found the beauty in a mud puddle and began to understand that I could learn from anything. It connects to the learning described in the poem.

¹³ The Haida word for “give away.” This will be a potlatch.

¹⁴ This is a pseudonym used for the school district where the research took place. It is also used in the references where any information identifying the school and district has been masked.

¹⁵ The context of this study is very complex, as the study took place within a unique community setting as well as a unique classroom setting. Additional contextual information can be found in the Part III: The Song of *k'aad 'aww* in the chapters with the corresponding titles.

¹⁶ The school serves four distinct communities on Haida Gwaii; however, references to “the community” in the findings usually refer to an amalgamation of these four communities. More rarely, “the community” refers to all of Haida Gwaii.

¹⁷ For Ministry of Education, Province of British Columbia data, students are considered Aboriginal or non-Aboriginal for a particular school year based on how they self-identify each September.

¹⁸ There was one exception noted when parents insisted that another option be provided for their child. In this case, I understand that the student completed English 10 online.

¹⁹ I contacted the First Nations Education Steering Committee, and they also believed this was the case.

²⁰ I selected the image in Figure 11 to demonstrate how I highlighted sections of the interviews according to the criteria I developed.

²¹ The image in Figure 12 demonstrates how I cut out the interview excerpts and read them individually.

²² The image in Figure 13 demonstrates how I organized the interview excerpts into categories and themes.

²³ The image in Figure 14 shows one of the four walls that I used to analyze my data. Each wall was covered with interview excerpts.

²⁴ I selected the image in Figure 17 to represent another place where I imagined that a dogfish mother might get caught on the outgoing tide.

²⁵ The image in Figure 18 illustrates an example of a home literacy practice. My niece was just learning to write, and she wanted to make a grocery list. That day, I also showed her a chapter of

my dissertation on my computer, and it amazed her to see so many letters making up so many words.

²⁶ Participants are identified by pseudonyms that they selected.

²⁷ The Haida word for “grandfather.”

²⁸ The image in Figure 19 is the working space of a friend of mine while we were at school. I felt that it captured literacy and writing from the perspective of a student.

²⁹ I selected the image in Figure 20 to illustrate an example of my own home literacy practices when I was in high school. It is the spiral bound notebook in which I did my own writing as a teenager.

³⁰ I selected the image in Figure 21 to represent the hope I feel for English First Peoples courses. The cedar is also very closely connected with the Haida.

³¹ At the time the study was completed, British Columbia had not yet transitioned into using the new curriculum which includes the promise that “Aboriginal perspectives and content have been authentically integrated into every subject” (Ministry of Education, British Columbia, 2015c, para. 16).

³² “Simplified so as to be intellectually undemanding and accessible to a wide audience”

(“Dumbed-down”, n.d.)

³³ I selected the image in Figure 22 to represent the differences between the struggles and the strengths of teaching English 10 First Peoples, while still recognizing that they are part of the same course.

³⁴ At the time of this study, the Integrated Resource Packages for English language arts 10 and English 10 First Peoples did not mandate specific resources to be used in the teaching of these

courses. In this dissertation, student and community participants in the study make references to resources (i.e., Shakespeare) in a way that implies they are mandatory components of the curriculum. This is likely because these participants are unfamiliar with the curriculum documents. The participants reference resources that are often used in the teaching of English language arts in this particular school; however, these resources have not been mandated by the Ministry of Education for British Columbia.

³⁵ I selected the image in Figure 23 to represent the unique aspects of our identities and how we differ from one another. There are two people and four boots; these represent connections and relationships.

³⁶ I selected the image in Figure 24 to represent the crabs described in the poem.

³⁷ I selected the image in Figure 25 to represent the multiple directions that we can take with our research.

³⁸ This conversation has been paraphrased.

³⁹ I did not review the students' marks, and I am basing this assessment on my classroom observations.

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Appendix A: Interview Guide (Student)

Interview Questions to be included with each participant

1. Can you tell me a bit about your ancestry?
2. Do you feel that your ancestry is represented at school? If so, how?
3. How does your ancestry affect your experience at school?

Interview 1: Life History Related to Writing

1. Tell me about your early experiences with writing as a child.
2. How did your family/friends feel about writing?
3. Are there times when you enjoyed writing?
4. What kinds of writing did you do at home/school?
5. What were some of the similarities/differences between the two?
6. What kinds of things did you learn at home/school about writing?

Interview 2: Current Writing Practices

1. Is there anything you would like to add or change from the previous interview?
2. Tell me about your experiences with writing now.
3. How do your family/friends feel about writing now?
4. Are there times when you enjoy writing?
5. What kinds of writing do you do at home/school?
6. What kinds of things do you learn at home/school about writing?
7. What are some of the similarities/differences?
8. Do you think it is important to be able to write?
9. What would your life be like if you could not write?

10. What kinds of things do you learn about writing at school that you consider useful for your life outside school?
11. What kinds of things do you learn about writing at school that you consider useful for your life after you graduate?
12. Tell me about English 10 First Peoples. How is it different/same from English 10? What do you like/dislike about it? What are the strengths/challenges of having such a course as the only course available to grade ten students?
13. Do you enjoy writing in your English (Language Arts) classes? Is it because of the content? Teaching style?
14. What is your favourite activity in English class? Why do you like it?
15. If you find something boring in English class, is it usually because of what you have to learn or how you are learning it?
16. Some people would say that it is important for teachers to know their students to improve learning, do you agree?
17. Tell me about the art project you are doing for this unit.
18. Tell me about the narrative that you are writing for this unit.

Interview 3: Making Meaning of Writing Practices

1. Is there anything you would like to add or change from the previous interview?
2. How do you feel your ability to write/writing has been influenced by your experiences in school? At home?
3. How do you feel your ability to write/writing has been influenced by your family? Your community?

4. Describe your experience with engaging in the creation of art projects as part of the writing process.
5. Describe your experience with engaging in narrative writing.
6. Tell me about the art project that you did for this unit.
7. Tell me about the narrative that you wrote for this unit.

Interview 4: Member Check

In this interview I will be sharing some of my findings and the ideas I have about the data that has been shared with me. I will be asking the students about these ideas and asking for further guidance with interpretations I am making. The interview will be covering their interview data, their art project, their narrative writing, and their schoolwork and/or emails.

Appendix B: Interview Guide (Teacher/Administrator)

Interview Questions to be included with each participant

1. Can you tell me a bit about your ancestry?
2. Do you feel that your ancestry is represented at the school? If so, how?
3. How does your ancestry affect your experience at the school?

Interview

1. How do these students' family/friends feel about writing?
2. Are there times when these students enjoy writing?
3. What kinds of writing do these students do at home/school?
4. What kinds of things do these students learn at home/school about writing?
5. What are some of the similarities/differences?
6. Do you believe they think it is important to be able to write?
7. What kinds of things do these students learn about writing at school that they consider useful for their lives outside of school?
8. What kinds of things do these students learn about writing at school that they consider useful for their lives after they graduate?
9. Tell me about English 10 First Peoples. How is it different/same from English 10? What do you like/dislike about it? What are the strengths/challenges of having such a course as the only course available to grade ten students?
10. Do these students enjoy writing in their English Language Arts classes? Is it because of the content? Teaching style?
11. What is their favourite activity in English class? Why do you think they like it?

12. Some people would say that it is important for teachers to know their students to improve learning, do you agree?
13. How do you feel these students' ability to write/writing has been influenced by their experiences in school? At home?
14. How do you feel these students' ability to write/writing has been influenced by their family? The community?

Additional Questions for Classroom Teacher

1. What do you notice about the students' level of engagement with the activities for this unit? With the art project? With the narrative writing?
2. What do you notice about the quality of the student work in connection with this unit?
3. How do you believe the art project supported the writing process?
4. How do you believe the narrative writing impacted the quality of student writing?
5. What are other observations that you made during the instruction of this unit?

Appendix C: Interview Guide (Parent/Guardian)

Interview Questions to be included with each participant

1. Can you tell me a bit about your ancestry?
2. Do you feel that your son/daughter's ancestry is represented at school? If so, how?
3. How does your son/daughter's ancestry affect his/her experience in school?

Interview 1: Life History Related to Writing

1. Tell me about your son/daughter's early experiences with writing as a child.
2. Are there times when your son/daughter enjoyed writing?
3. What kinds of writing does he/she do at home/school?
4. What were some of the similarities/differences between the two?
5. What kinds of things does he/she learn at home/school about writing?
6. How do you feel about writing?
7. How do your family/friends/community feel about writing?
8. What kinds of writing does he/she do at home/school?
9. What kinds of things does he/she learn at home/school about writing?
10. What are some of the similarities/differences?
11. What kinds of things does he/she learn about writing at school that you consider useful for his/her life outside school?
12. What kinds of things does he/she learn about writing at school that you consider useful for his/her life after he/she graduates?
13. Tell me about English 10 First Peoples. How is it different/same from English 10? What do you like/dislike about it? What are the strengths/challenges of having such a course as the only course available to grade ten students?

14. Does your son/daughter enjoy writing in your English (Language Arts) classes? Is it because of the content? Teaching style?
15. Some people would say that it is important for teachers to know their students to improve learning, do you agree?
16. How do you feel your son/daughter's ability to write/writing has been influenced by his/her experiences in school? At home?
17. How do you feel your son/daughter's ability to write/writing has been influenced by your family? The community?

Appendix D: Interview Guide (Community Member)

Interview Questions to be included with each participant

1. Can you tell me a bit about your ancestry?
2. Do you feel that your community's ancestry is represented at the school? If so, how?
3. How do you believe that a student's ancestry may affect his/her experience in school?

Interview

1. What kinds of writing do you believe students do at home/school?
2. What are some of the similarities/differences between the two?
3. What kinds of things do you believe students learn at home/school about writing?
4. What are some of the similarities/differences between the two?
5. Do you think it is important to be able to write?
6. How do your friends/family/community feel about writing?
7. Tell me about English 10 First Peoples. How is it different/same from English 10? What do you like/dislike about it? What are the strengths/challenges of having such a course as the only course available to grade ten students?
8. What kinds of things do you believe these students learn about writing at school that you consider useful for their lives outside school?
9. What kinds of things do you believe these students learn about writing at school that you consider useful for their lives after they graduate?
10. Some people would say that it is important for teachers to know their students to improve learning, do you agree?
11. How do you feel these students' ability to write/writing has been influenced by their experiences in school? At home?

12. How do you feel these students' ability to write/writing has been influenced by their family? Your community?