

REFLECTIONS ON ENGAGEMENT WITH A FIRST NATION ELDER:  
FOUR LESSONS FOR CANADIAN TEACHERS BEGINNING THEIR CAREERS IN  
NORTHERN CANADIAN FIRST NATION COMMUNITIES

by

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## Abstract

Many provincially licensed teachers with degrees from southern Canadian universities are hired to teach in Northern Canadian First Nation communities each year. In fact, the year I was hired to teach in a small, First Nation community in central Yukon, there were four other new teachers moving up from cities in the south. Yukon Government's website states, "teachers who wish to apply to teach in one of the Yukon's 29 schools must hold or be eligible for certification in a Canadian province" (YE, 2011). I quickly learned that being a non-First Nation teacher in a First Nation community is very challenging. After three years, I chose to leave and accept a teaching position in the capital city, where the vast majority of students were non-First Nation and had been brought up in the city. I left the village feeling disengaged from the people of the community and professionally deflated. I am unsure if I provided anything of lasting value to my students. Years later, through a process of further education and reflection on my past experience, I have learned several lessons about what non-First Nation, beginning teachers ought to understand, so they may appropriately engage with the local community and with their students. In the article that follows, I share the following four lessons: 1) Reach out to those in the community, and remain a learner, open to community knowledge, 2) facilitate authentic experiences for students, 3) facilitate the teaching of traditional community skills to assist students' spiritual development, and 4) bring the school and community together to create culturally relevant education. My hope is that other teachers traveling north to teach in Canadian First Nation communities may learn from my experience and be positioned to create more positive relationships and meaningful learning opportunities.

## Reflections on Engagement with a First Nation Elder: Four Lessons for Canadian Teachers

### Beginning Their Careers in Northern Canadian First Nation Communities

I am a middle-class Canadian male of European descent, raised in Vancouver, BC. I attended private schools and was successful at all educational levels. I completed my Bachelor of Education at the University of British Columbia and was hired to teach secondary business courses. I had a very successful first year of teaching. Student achievement was high, and my teaching evaluations were consistently very good. After my first year of teaching, however, I wanted out of the big city. The noise, the busyness, the pollution, and high costs pushed me away. I took a position in a very small remote First Nation village in Central Yukon. Given the success I'd had in my first year of teaching, I presumed my teaching strategies would continue to be more than adequate. The First Nation students I'd be teaching would have a wonderful opportunity to become successful at school, I expected.

I quickly discovered, however, that this expectation was not realistic. After several weeks, I learned that the assigned curriculum and my teaching methods were not having the desired effect. Student attendance and marks were very poor, despite my hard work and dedication. I also became aware of the disconnect between the school and the people of the remote village. It was rare to see parents or other community members at the school or anywhere near it, for that matter. As the months passed, my job satisfaction began to decline. The excitement I had felt in the summer began to turn to anxiousness. Teaching was not as rewarding as I had presumed it would be. Interestingly, research from Yukon Territory reveals that teachers who move into remote communities to teach feel stress in their lives resulting from both a lack of community connection and an inability to balance the school goals with those of the local culture (Klassen et al., 2009).

To be certified to teach in the Yukon, the government required each new teacher to acquire a skill by working with a local Elder. This requirement was to be met within two years of employment. I suppose it was a way to facilitate a connection between teachers and community Elders. It was essentially a three-credit college course of about 20-weeks duration. We were expected to chronicle our experiences and present the process and finished product to our colleagues. Occasionally, we'd meet as a group to share our experiences. I was not terribly thrilled about this required course, at first. I was also fearful to venture into the community, to spend time with the people I'd learned to avoid, as I will explain within the next few paragraphs. Little did I know that I was about to meet someone who would offer me many valuable lessons. I realize, in retrospect, that meeting and working with the Elder, Art John, was one of the best experiences I had during my three-year position in Central Yukon. It was significant professional development for me. Looking back, I regret not seizing more opportunities to engage with community Elders and parents.

Years have passed. I've continued teaching in Vancouver, BC. A Master of Education program in leadership has facilitated much reflection on my experiences teaching in the village. Many times, I've considered what I'd do differently if I were beginning again. If I knew then what I do today, I believe I would have engaged in greater leadership at my school. Rather than accepting current practice as appropriate and expecting leadership to arrive from others, I would have heeded the following four lessons and attempted to create meaningful relationships with members of the community, and as a result, have been better equipped to create a culturally relevant school experience for my students.

**Lesson One: Reach out to those in the community, and remain a learner, open to new knowledge, experiences, and ways of doing things.**

When I started teaching in the community, I wasn't ready to embrace and privilege the First Nation's ways of knowing because I saw the knowledge I possessed as more valid. I arrived from the cosmopolitan city with university degrees. I was a professionally certified teacher. My beliefs about education, life, and the world were suitable for all, I believed. I kept to myself, associating with my wife, another new teacher, and a couple of RCMP officers in town. I felt I didn't have much to gain by associating with the locals. I turned down opportunities to hunt, to go on snowmobile trips, to play volleyball, and to socialize with the local people. Partly, my reclusiveness was motivated by a fear of the people. I had heard many stories from others regarding the alcoholism and violence that plagued the community. Stories from my RCMP acquaintances reinforced some of my misguided beliefs that the people were troubled and potentially dangerous. I can also remember being cautioned by another teaching colleague not to visit the pub in the local hotel or invite locals into my house. I was encouraged to keep my distance. So I did. Interestingly, the community was also physically divided by a main road. The vast majority of the First Nation community lived on one side of the street, and the non-First Nation newcomers lived on the other side, where the store, gas station, hotel, school, and Catholic church were located. It was easy for me to stay on my side of the street.

This "ideology of cultural superiority" (Bishop, 2003, p. 222) I felt was also evident in my approach to teaching. I did feel that I had the necessary knowledge to offer the students and the ways to do it. I did hold deficit views and lower expectations of the First Nation students I taught. I blamed them for their lack of attendance and success at school, instead of considering maybe it wasn't the students that were failing.

The Yukon Government's requirement for new teachers to spend time with local Elders to acquire a skill forced my hand, to some degree. I wasn't terribly excited about this

expectation. In fact, I put it off until midway into my second year of teaching. I felt there must be a more productive way to spend my time. Assessing student work, planning for instruction, or taking personal time to ski in the bush seemed smarter options for me. I wondered, how would a traditional skill help me or my students?

As I drove out to meet the First Nation Elder, Art John, I entered a little homestead on the edge of a lake. I did not know what to expect, as I had had minimal contact with Elders, at that point. They were from a different world, I thought. The man's home was tiny. Outside, there was an outhouse and several old outbuildings. Each of his dogs was tied to a doghouse, but I couldn't see a sled. One dog, I had heard, was a wolf. I didn't get close enough to check.

The Elder had a warmth and glow about him. His face was wrinkled and toughened from many years of minus forty degree cold and long summer days. He seemed relaxed and easy going. He welcomed me into his house, even though he was a product of residential schools and knew I was a city-raised teacher. I remember being surprised at how welcome I felt in his home, as I had expected indifference. Inside, melted snow was put in a kettle and heated on a wood stove in the corner. The floor showed the soil of many years of living in the bush. There was no TV, no radio, and no phone.

Art was a humble man, and his eyes told of great wisdom and experience. Although I was there to learn to tan a caribou hide, he was in no rush to get started. He wanted to chat as he bustled around his one-room house and made some tea.

Art seemed happy to have a visitor. Despite my nervousness, I was interested to hear what he had to say. He talked about the hides he tanned. The ladies in town would make them into moccasins, mittens, and hats for the families and to sell at craft fairs. He told me some stories about his childhood. He had met the infamous Mad Trapper of Rat River that passed

through the community many years before. He had been a trapper himself and a prospector, spending considerable time in the bush alone. He was one of several children who would run and hide in the bush when the cars came to town to take the children to residential school, so many years ago. He talked with a twinkle in his eye as he spoke about how the kids would come home after many months to forget all they'd been taught in school. They wanted to be with their own people, to be participating in community life. They weren't interested in being pulled away to learn the ways of the white man, he said.

### **Missed Opportunities**

Several years later, I was doing some research for a Master of Education course I was enrolled in. While reading a chapter on northern schools in Nunavut today, a particular passage immediately made me think of Art and the things he had said a decade earlier. It read, "To become a Person we need time: time with our family, time with our Elders and community, time out on the land...Instead, the Qalunnaat government puts us in school - away from the land, away from our family, our community, our Elders" (Rasmussen & Akulukjuk, 2009, p. 292). I wondered how many First Nation people across the North would echo the same sentiments. I began to consider that for many First Nation people in the North, school may be resented for locking children away in an artificial environment for six hours every day. I believe Art was trying to teach me this, ten years prior, but I wasn't ready to hear his message. He was suggesting that education must be grounded in local ways of knowing and school ought to be "a place where students gain and improve the skills required by the community in its daily life" (Grant & Gillespie, 1993). Unfortunately, I wasn't open to the knowledge that Art could have provided me with. I began to wonder what other lessons I'd unfortunately missed during my time in the village, as a result of being closed to acquiring local knowledge.

During my second year of teaching, we had a First Nation consultant from Whitehorse visit us to discuss some of the concerns she and other First Nation people had with the way schooling was proceeding for our students. Her position was that we, being Canadian teachers from the South, were not adequately suited to teach First Nation students. Our worldviews didn't reflect those of the people, she instructed. Instead of wanting more information from her or requesting assistance to make my teaching more culturally compatible, I dismissed her as a nutcase, as did my colleagues. We were actually quite offended that she'd make such accusations. Looking back, I realize it never occurred to me that my students were not represented in the textbooks we used at school. Their culture had survived for hundreds of years in one of the world's harshest climates. Of their stories, songs, knowledge of the natural world, their tools, and their spiritual understanding; none was being brought into my lessons. Perhaps, this consultant's method wasn't gentle as it might have been, but what might I have learned by being open to what she could have provided? I regret not being ready to embrace her teaching.

Recently, I read the following statement on the local council's website: "We are an oral culture, so reams of paper and thick reports do not impress us. In fact, many of our Elders still prefer to communicate in our traditional language" (KDC, 2010). I chuckled to myself thinking how much I relied on thick textbooks and written output when I taught in the community. For the first time, I recognized that my methods, that predominantly involved reading and responding, were not appropriate. If I'd been willing to engage the community around me, perhaps I'd have known to make use of the rich oral history of the people and to consider "storywork" (Archibald, 2008) as an educational methodology.

Other teachers in similar rural locations have recognized the need to be open to learning from those in their communities. Price (2003), who taught in a northern village, claims, "I would

not have been effective as a teacher in this place if I had not been flexible, open-minded, and willing to interact with and learn from the people in this community” (p. 48). Starnes (2006) attributes her teaching success in a rural community to making connections with community Elders. She encourages teachers to attend community events and seek out mentors to learn about community expectations, traditions, and goals. She claims that there are people in each community “who want to help us find our way through the cultural and historical fog” (p. 390).

During my last week as a teacher in the village, a parent I hadn't spoken with before told me it was too bad I was leaving. I felt genuine sadness in her that I was yet another in the continuous stream of departures from the community. I felt regret that I hadn't taken the time to reach out to her and other parents during my three year stay. While I had made a few connections with individuals in the community, I had failed to connect with my students' families.

### **Recognizing Community Knowledge**

Spending time with Art opened his world to me. I began to learn about his culture, his values and those of his people. I witnessed his tremendous knowledge, skill, and confidence. Additionally, I observed his smile, sense of humour, humility, generosity, sense of contentment, patience, and acceptance. Interestingly, in a recent Master of Education course, we were asked to identify and describe the wisest, most educated people we had encountered. Art was one of my three choices. He exhibited the qualities that I believe most are striving to achieve. Certainly, these are traits that the people of the community wished to see in their children. It is no surprise why the people show such high regard for their Elders and wish for the children to be involved with them.

Looking back, I realize I witnessed a knowledgeable people. They excelled at hunting, fishing, trapping, foraging, navigating (land and water), creating (snowshoes, sewing, carving,

art), and sports (hockey). Yet, at the time, I didn't recognize the gifts of my students or enable them to bring their knowledge or skills into the classroom. When teaching science, for example, I neglected to discover what the people knew about the natural world that surrounded us. I missed an opportunity to affirm that the body of knowledge developed over thousands of years is at least as significant as the Western ways of knowing developed in the last few centuries. Rasmussen & Akulukjuk (2009) question, "Doesn't it seem odd that a biologist would want to study "arctic char reproductive stages" and not first make an effort to learn the words and stories relating 4000 years of teaching about char encoded in the language and knowledge systems" of the people? (p. 286). Bouvier (2010), coordinator of the Aboriginal Learning Knowledge Centre in Saskatchewan, suggests that the learning environments and activities for First Nation students be, not only meaningful and relevant, but gift and strength based. Jules (1999) reminds us that historically, education for First Nation people was about building on the strengths of people. Each individual was seen as possessing unique and varied gifts and talents, and education facilitated the development and sharing of those aptitudes. If I were beginning again, I'd certainly attempt to bring together the cultural knowledge of the people and the knowledge found in the curriculum I was assigned to teach. By no means am I suggesting the abandonment of western ways of knowing, but the importance of teaching students that both may be integrated and applied. Hargreaves (2002) would call this "interplay among points of view, values, and beliefs" (p. 78).

Bramwell & Foreman (1993) explain that historically, First Nation education recognized each person as both an active learner and active teacher. This flexibility in roles fostered collaboration instead of competition and promoted "multiple solutions rather than required consensus on the "right" solution" (Bramwell & Foreman, 1993, p. 566). Teachers didn't have all

the answers. Nor were they employed to transmit information. Their role was to facilitate learning while learning themselves. I expect that with this teaching methodology, cultural knowledge would be shared and celebrated, as everyone is seen as a teacher.

**Lesson Two: Significant learning occurs when students are creating through authentic experiences.**

When Art was young, he learned by sharing experiences with the Elders. Learning happened while doing. He didn't read about things in books. He was out exploring the world for himself, making connections, and doing things that mattered. He told me stories about hunting, trapping, and prospecting out on the land. I was amazed by the skill and confidence this man had acquired. Art, as a young man, would go upriver and shoot a moose. After butchering the meat, he'd get wood from a few trees and make a moose skin boat. He'd float the meat downstream until the skin had become water-logged. At that point, he'd build a fire, dry out the hide and begin again, until he made it home. Everything Art shared with me was knowledge he had learned through authentic experience. Authentic experience, I came to realize, could help my own students learn.

When I taught in the village, I had a range of grade levels in my classroom. Students were required to work independently using the textbooks provided. The day was chunked into several disciplines. We'd do an hour of math, then an hour of English, and so on. The various disciplines, arranged in blocks, didn't connect to each other very often. We'd move through the various textbooks, chapter by chapter. I'd put instructions on the whiteboard to direct each grade level at the start of every block, and then I'd circulate, eventually getting around to each student. This was what most of our days looked like. I attempted to cover the prescribed curriculum by assigning content for students to reproduce in some way. I was the knowledge giver and

assessor. Little did I know, I was using an ineffective transmission pedagogy, rather than methods that have proven successful with First Nation students.

Research reveals that First Nation students learn best as apprentices involved in real life tasks. Grant & Gillespie (1993) inform, "Parents and Elders use an integrated approach to knowledge as they teach younger people by sharing experiences with them, not isolating knowledge and skills within certain disciplines". There are successful examples where this type of learning is taking place. With the assistance of Yup'ik Elders in Alaska, students learn mathematics, history, language, and science through the building of fish traps and salmon drying racks (Lipka, 2005). At the Canadian "School in the Bush" in Nelson House, Manitoba, educators take students out to trappers' cabins where they learn a number of different skills. "One lesson centres on the tanning of a moose hide. Because the process takes time, the lesson has many parts. During the process, children learn scientific, ecological, monetary, mathematical, and language arts skills, all from the perspective of their culture" (Grant & Gillespie, 1993). Given my own experience of learning to tan a hide (see Lesson Three), I recognize the varied learning possibilities that exist in participating in such an activity.

Grant and Gillespie (1993) encourage engaging First Nation students with hiking, canoeing, hunting, fishing, and foraging trips. Upon reflection, I recall my students were very engaged when we went on fishing trips, hikes in the mountains, or on hunts for edible wild plants. It was these experiences I ought to have built lessons around, rather than having viewed them as extra-curricular, less important endeavors. In my community, hunting was so important to the people. In fact, the town is empty in August as the people are in the bush. I envision students apprenticing as biologists on the tundra, studying eating habits, food sources, survival

strategies, butchering and preservation, traditional cooking, and wisdom of the caribou. It is on these types of trips that oral history and mythology may also be explored.

Pirbhai-Ilich (2010) speaks of a "cooperative, observational, experiential model of voluntary participation" (p. 260-261). Using this approach, students are not told what to do. Actually, few directives are given. During cooperative activities, students begin as observers and participate when they are ready. With support, they join in for small parts, gradually doing more, eventually shifting to mastery and self direction. "They learn by observing and cooperating with one another. They are not forced to learn anything they are not ready to learn" (Grant & Gillespie, 1993). I wish I'd learned and discovered ways to utilize this knowledge more in the classroom. I feel much more scaffolding and cooperative discovery would have made my students more successful.

It excites me to think that school may be a place where students are engaging with their communities. Pirbhai-Ilich (2010) shares a story of engaged Aboriginal students that used technology to investigate the negative aspects of gang culture and create a video to deliver their own messages as a service to their people. I envision students getting involved with community projects: construction, beautification, economic development, writing books to capture the knowledge of their people, assisting Elders or others in need. What a great way to increase the visibility of the school and bring the community and school together.

### **Lesson Three: Traditional community skills need to be taught in schools to facilitate students' spiritual development.**

I watched Art, an amazing eighty-something-year-old man, drape a heavy caribou hide over a stump and begin to scrape the flesh away. He did this without chatting and in a rhythmic motion. The scraper was made from moose bone tied with duct tape to a piece of metal that

resembled an old car part; an interesting intertwining of traditional and modern, I thought. He scraped effortlessly, yet with care and precision. After a while, I began to scrape along with him. My arms worked in a steady rhythm. My mind jumped from one thought to the next. I wondered about the caribou that was once attached to this massive coat. I pondered how long this task would take, and what this Elder thought of me. We continued scraping, quietly. It was a little awkward at first. Two people from different worlds, working together on a task in silence.

Over the next couple of weeks, I spent hours scraping the meat and cutting the hair from the hide. Interestingly, I found the seemingly monotonous activity to be therapeutic. Despite it being a physical activity, I seemed to get into a relaxed state where my mind quieted down. I felt a sense of contentment. I began to wonder if Art's tanning of hides for all those years was more important to him than most people realize. I wonder if it enabled him to smile after enduring some of the worst hardships.

I can remember being in awe in the community one evening when I entered a room in the local college to find a dozen or so female Elders sewing and beading in complete silence. I watched for a while as they methodically created. The feeling in the room was one of peace and contentment. At the time, I thought it was strange that no one was talking. Now, I'm sure these women were seeking the calm that meditative practice provides. A couple of the newcomers who began attending the sewing evenings stated that the appeal was more than the satisfaction associated with learning a skill and creating. It was about the peace they felt.

The Elders I had met and learned about all seemed to have a skill they practiced: beading, sewing, tanning hides, making snowshoes, carving, painting, and drum making. Art told me he wished that the younger generations learned the traditional skills of the people. I believe he knew that it would serve them on several levels.

In recent years, I've experienced the power of meditative practice, and I realize that this is the activity I discovered while tanning the hide. Whether called meditation, contemplation, or reflection, it “brings physical and mental calmness and enhances the power of concentration power, the memory, intuition, inner strength and peace of mind” (SC, 2011). I feel a sense of connection and peace after meditating for only twenty minutes. Whenever I'm tired or depressed, it picks me right up again. It can be done through a concentration on ones breathing, the moving waves, a drum beat, through movement as in Tai Chi, in tanning a hide, or while performing some other rhythmic activity.

I recall dealing with very withdrawn students on a number of occasions in my second and third years of teaching. Students in my community had witnessed terrible things, some had lost loved ones to drug abuse, some had been abused, and many were dealing with poor self concept. Yet, I felt powerless to do anything. Students wouldn't talk to me about their issues. They were extremely private. I now understand what I might have facilitated in my classroom to assist them. If schools are to provide for the needs of the whole child, I propose that students are given opportunities to engage in silent meditation, through traditional activities. Emotional and spiritual learning are certainly as important as intellectual learning.

On one occasion, I invited a local female Elder into the classroom to teach the students to sew and bead. She was the older sister of one of our First Nation teachers. Students created beautiful displays by sewing painted caribou hair tufts on velvet backgrounds. I was amazed. The students were totally engaged in the process of learning this skill. They took time to design their patterns and exhibited patience at wielding needles. Not only were they creating, they were silent. It was as if they craved this quiet time.

#### **Lesson Four: Bring the school and community together to create culturally relevant education.**

Given the lack of community involvement in my school and the lack of student attendance and progress, it is fair to say that the people didn't feel very well served. Simon, a teacher from another rural Yukon community, noted, "There's a sense in our community that the First Nation people do not see themselves reflected in the school system" (Klassen, 2009, p. 390). Research conducted in Northern Alberta reveals First Nation people there believe school is "a mandated institution to be endured" (Goddard & Foster, 2002, p. 7).

As mentioned before, teachers arrive unprepared for the new cultural environment in northern First Nation communities. Klassen (2009) comments regarding Yukon teachers in rural postings, "Teachers expressed uncertainty about the proper balance between academic achievement and culturally traditional learning" (p. 392). A Yukon teacher claims, "The First Nations community has priorities and things that they believe pretty strongly, and then you've got the Yukon Board of Education that focuses on exam results, and how do you bring these two together? You get a community that struggles to support their kids in education" (391).

Several times, Art told me he wished that his own children and grandchildren would show the same interest in the "ways of an Indian". He worried about the future of the people. He'd say that they were losing their culture. The language, the stories, the traditions were dying, and he felt helpless to change this. He wanted his descendants to connect with their cultural knowledge and traditions, and he also wanted them to learn knowledge and skills that would help them in the future. While I could not have taught such cultural knowledge to my students directly, I could have worked with the community to help facilitate the kinds of educational experiences that could enable such learning to occur.

## **Barriers to Overcome**

Goddard and Foster (2002) explain that there are many barriers to overcome before we discover the true values and goals of the people and begin to create meaningful school experiences for First Nation students.

To begin, First Nation parents and Elders must be included and made partners in education. They must understand how much they are needed. Grant & Gillespie (1993) report, parents are unsure as to how they can participate in improving the school system or their community" (p. 37-38). One research participant commented, "Teachers attend school for many, many years and know what they're doing. I can't tell them what to do. Of course, they know better than me. I only have a grade 8 education" (Agbo, 2005, p. 308).

Goddard & Foster's research (2002) reveals that community members are discouraged by others "aggressive manner or use of big words" (p. 436). Looking back, I can recall myself. I was keen, confident in my knowledge and abilities, and speaking a different language related to learning objectives, curriculum, and assessment. I can remember purposefully avoiding a discussion about my program with a parent, by overwhelming her with educational terminology. She wouldn't question my program if I could prove how sophisticated I was. Truthfully, I wasn't terribly confident, and I was terrified that my teaching would be put under a microscope. My misguided attempts to protect myself closed opportunities for meaningfully connecting with this parent.

Anderson (1998) reminds us that the most important factor in attaining meaningful community involvement is to truly share ownership of the important issues. Teachers must be willing to see their own worldviews as limited. Teachers moving to northern First Nation communities must not see themselves as pedagogical missionaries, arriving to inform, but as

collaborators with the community, open to First Nation knowledge. It is the responsibility of the teachers to empower community members to share the knowledge they possess, regardless of their schooling experiences. If I were starting over today, I'd be making attempts to visit with people and understand what they hoped for their children, how they would like to see education progressing, and how they could get involved, even if it meant traveling to the homes of the people. They were right across the street.

We must, as Bishop (2003) states, challenge the notion that knowledge is that which is prepared and advanced by academics and embrace a new collaborative pedagogy. When we are willing to learn from our students, colleagues, and community members, we grow. Our beliefs evolve. At the same time, we validate those around us. I certainly agree with Berger et al (2006) who stress, "A major effort should be undertaken to develop northern curricula and resources locally" (p. 194). Looking back, I wish I had tried to plan relevant themes and lessons with students and community members like Art.

## **Conclusion**

As a beginning teacher, I mistakenly thought that education was the mastery of knowledge, rather than the mastery of self through knowledge. I didn't see that reproducing information, much of it completely irrelevant to the lives of my students, was not educating them. I wasn't facilitating an understanding of who they were and how they fit into the world. I wasn't inspiring them to dream, to challenge, or to create. I wasn't meeting the needs of the whole child. I certainly wasn't validating them. Yet, I believe, I could have made significant attempts to do so.

I now understand that Canadian teachers moving into First Nation communities must connect with the community and attempt the creation of relevant educational experiences for

their students, if they are to be successful. By partnering with the community, a collaboratively-developed curriculum may bridge the gap between current Western ideas and the tremendous knowledge that exists in each community.

Where does one begin? A good place to start is with local community liaison representatives. School administrators, educational consultants, and school department/board personnel may also facilitate relations with the local people. It is important that teachers discover and follow the local protocols for community engagement. Local traditions must be understood and respected.

Additionally, school administrators, school departments/boards, and universities offering preservice teacher education programs can work with First Nation communities to facilitate meaningful educational change. New curriculum can be co-created to guide teachers. I agree with Starnes (2006) who states, schools must become places where teachers are supported to try new things and teach in ways that will likely be foreign to them. A culture of risk-taking must be fostered and accepted.

While all educators bear responsibility for educating teachers with respect to community engagement in First Nation communities, teachers must not wait and expect such instruction to arrive from elsewhere. Teachers must take initiative by pushing for resources, for time, and for change. They must take risks. Ultimately, we teachers are responsible for the lessons we facilitate. We know if we are truly educating our students or not. When it happens, we feel it. Our students feel successful, and so do we. Given my experiences to date, I strongly believe that the greatest potential to positively change the education system will come from teachers taking leadership.

Most importantly, however, teachers have to face and welcome the opportunity to challenge their own beliefs, to recognize their own assumptions, to see their knowledge as limited, as well as the knowledge of their cultures. Our thoughts and actions are guided by the beliefs each of us carries around. We take them for granted and often assume they are universal. It is when we are faced with those who make us stop and think, those who challenge our beliefs, that we are given the opportunity to recognize them. We can either judge and condemn, suggesting our ideas represent truth, or we can be open to the perspectives and the beliefs of others and learn with them.

Biesta (2006) draws from Derrida's (1978) concept of "transcendental violence" when he claims that true education is "a form of violence that interferes with the sovereignty of the subject by asking difficult questions and creating difficult encounters" (p. 29). As we react "to what is other and different, to what challenges, irritates, or even disturbs us" (p. 27), the potential for deep and transforming effects occurs. Learning is our response, the "attempt to reorganize and reintegrate as a result of disintegration" (p. 27). The education system, including teachers themselves, has a responsibility to facilitate this type of "interference" for its teachers, so that they are propelled to tear down walls that they can't even see. As my experience with Art demonstrates, teacher engagement with community members has great potential as an important source of the requisite interference that can become educative.

Furthermore, I ask what responsibility the education system has to create citizens that are more aware of their belief systems, their egos, their spiritual selves? Isn't this the kind of learning that is needed so that we may create more acceptance, more tolerance of other ways of knowing and being, and more equity in our world?

As I write this paper, I continue to recognize more of my colonizing assumptions. As a non-First Nation southerner of Canada, I am attempting to prescribe in this paper how education for First Nation students ought to change. Yet, who am I to make these assertions? I understand that this paper has limitations and my suggestions likely have flaws. For example, at the conclusion of my paper, I recognize that the authors featured in my research are predominantly non-First Nation researchers, and I have a lot more reading ahead of me. However, what is most important is that I have embarked on a journey. This paper reflects where I am right now, not necessarily where I will end up. I look forward to my continuing evolution as a teacher and as a human being.

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