

TRICKSTER CHASES THE TALE OF EDUCATION

by

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©

Abstract

The research story is a narrative woven of my own self reflections, the voice of the co-researchers, and traditional Mi'kmaw story characters. The story follows a group of community members from Wildcat First Nation and staff members from North Queens School as we collaborate and learn initially through a salmon project based in the community and then through the implementation of a native studies course in the school. Both initiatives reflect our efforts to center and legitimate Mi'kmaw knowledge in the school. As the work progressed, we were repairing and strengthening the threads of interconnectivity between people involved in the project and between people and other life of the land.

My personal struggles to decolonize my mind are reflected in a series of trickster stories. In these, Crow challenges me to acknowledge the linear logic of my own default thinking. When I am faced with the need to consider the coming together of both Indigenous world view and Western/ Eurocentric world view in education, I find that the place between these world views is trickster space. It is in trickster space that we can move on from old stories and, through respect and reciprocity, work collaboratively to create and live new stories.

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My knowledge of storytelling has come from listening to and reading traditional Aboriginal stories. I want to acknowledge my daughter, shalan joudry, a storyteller, in my learning. However, I am not an Elder and I claim no cultural expertise in storytelling or in Mi'kmaw knowledge and ways of understanding the world. I take personal responsibility for any errors, omissions, or misunderstandings in this writing. I am still learning.

Crow's first story¹

“So, you want to know about developing Aboriginal² education?” Crow³ says. I nod my head. “Did you ever hear the story about weasel’s⁴ first day at school?” and then he begins as if he knows that I will benefit from the story, regardless of whether or not I have heard it before. “Well it is weasel’s first day at school and he is jumping up and down and spinning around! Oh he is so excited about the promises of schooling! Around and around he is running, looking for all those promises; round and round in a circle until he is chasing the tale of education. That Teacher is hopping mad. ‘Hey! Stop knocking things over and settle down! Look at that Big Mess you made in education’, she says. Weasel is so dizzy from all that spinning and chasing that everything looks blurry. He lays there on the ground; his eyes rolling around in his head. He sniffs the air. Those promises of schooling smell rotten. He opens one eye and then the other, looking and looking. He can see that some of the threads⁵ holding life together are torn. They are old, frayed, and dirty. They are rotten. That is a mighty Big Mess in education.

¹ Unless otherwise noted, the stories in this dissertation are modern day stories that make use of traditional Mi’kmaw characters and themes (Whitehead, 2006; Rand, 1893). These stories came to me as thoughts and dreams during the course of this research and writing.

² Aboriginal refers to the First People of the land, specifically the country of Canada. Indigenous is used to refer to Aboriginal people globally and Mi’kmaq is used to refer to the Aboriginal people within whose nation the research took place.

³ The voice of Crow came to me during my thinking, reflecting, and dreaming through out this research. He gave me teachings and challenged my thinking. Marshall, Marshall, and Iwama (2010) explain that within Mi’kmaw stories, “crow is not only a legendary figure or representation of morality. Crow is a being with a spirit. This means that crow—or tree—when spoken of in gendered English, is ‘he’ or ‘she’, not ‘it’” (p. 176).

⁴ Weasel is a traditional character in Mi’kmaw stories.

⁵ Stewart-Harawira (2005a) describes the energy that flows between all entities as a “sacred thread” (p. 37). Ermine (1995) describes this energy as “a mysterious force that connects the totality of existence” (p.103).

'I didn't make that Big Mess', says weasel. 'That mess is old. 'Bout time that Big Mess got fixed up'."⁶

⁶ "The story was told in a way so that the story became a teacher" (Elder Ellen White, as cited by Archibald 1997, p. 208).

CHAPTER ONE

THE STORY BEGINS

Introduction

Crow and I are in Kespukwitk⁷, one of the seven districts of Mi'kma'ki⁸ or the Mi'kmaw⁹ Nation in the northeastern region of Turtle Island¹⁰. Wildcat First Nation, a part of the Acadia Band, is a small Mi'kmaw¹¹ community in this area¹². It is on the banks of the Wildcat River, a tributary of the Medway River. Mi'kmaw children and youth from Wildcat attend North Queens School, a primary (kindergarten) to grade twelve school in the adjacent village of Caledonia. The school is located between the Mersey River and the Medway River, watersheds that are about twenty kilometers apart. My adult children live in Bear River First Nation, a community in the region, and other extended family members live in Wildcat First Nation. I live between these two communities, on the small strip of land between the Mersey and the Medway Rivers. I am a researcher and an educator at North Queens School as well as the storyteller for this work, a self-appointed role because this version of the story is being told as part of my PhD studies. I heed Risha Dunlop's (2008) advice: "to new researchers, I say tell your

⁷ Kespukwitk is the region of the Mi'kmaq Nation more commonly known as southwest Nova Scotia.

⁸ Henderson (2000) states that Mi'kma'ki translates to "space or land of friendship" (p. 157). He describes it as 20,000 miles that, in modern terms, is the land now called Newfoundland, Saint-Pierre et Miquelon, Nova Scotia, New Brunswick, northern Maine, Prince Edward Island, the Magdalene archipelago, and the Gaspé Peninsula of Quebec (note 23).

⁹ In the distinction between Mi'kmaq and Mi'kmaw, the Mi'kmaw Resource Guide (Native Council of Nova Scotia, 1994, p. 2) explains "The word Micmac is nothing more than the corruption in spelling of the plural form of the word Mi'kmaq as is represented by the Francis/ Smith orthography. It is, and has been, demeaning to the Mi'kmaw people in that they would be called anything but what they are, namely Mi'kmaq or The Family. The definite article "the" suggests that "Mi'kmaq" is the undeclined form indicated by the initial letter "m." When declined in the singular, it reduces to the following forms: nikmaq- my family; kikmaq- your family; wikma- his/her family. The variant form Mi'kmaw plays two grammatical roles: 1) it is the singular of Mikmaq and 2) it is an adjective in circumstances where it precedes a noun (e.g. Mi'kmaw people, Mi'kmaw treaties, Mi'kmaw person, etc.).

¹⁰ This area is part of the region also referred to as Atlantic Canada.

¹¹ There are fewer than forty residents in Wildcat First Nation.

¹² A map of Nova Scotia may be found at:

http://atlas.nrcan.gc.ca/site/english/maps/reference/provinceterritories/nova_scotia,

and a map of the traditional territory of the Mi'kmaq may be found at: <http://www.danielnpaul.com/Map-Mi'kmaqTerritory.html>

own stories and the stories of others with artistic power and skill” (p. 64). In telling this story I rely extensively on autobiographical narrative because “all I can tell you about... is me. All the rest is guesswork” (a Cree Elder, as cited by Ross, 1996, p. x).

However, “too narrow a knowing privileges one story over another, and silences voices that equally belong and have a right to speak” (Wattchow, 2004, p. 12). And so it is that many other voices are intertwined with this predominately first person narrative, and in the interweaving of the many voices and perspectives, “the talk is honoured” (Kovach, 2009, p. 99) and the truth of the situation is found (Kimpson, 2005, p.77). There are the voices of Crow and the Salmon¹³ as well as the co-researchers: Todd Labrador, Tina Dixon, Jamie Jermeay, and shalan joudry. Todd, Tina, and Jamie are from Wildcat First Nation. Todd is an Elder, Tina is the Aboriginal Support Worker at the school, and Jamie comes to the school regularly to drum with students. Shalan lives in Bear River First Nation. She is my daughter and she is a storyteller.

Todd, Tina, Jamie, shalan, and I all have a vested interest in the education of Mi’kmaw youth and in the local public school changing to reflect Mi’kmaw world view¹⁴ in the education of Mi’kmaw youth. We are all also interrelated through extended

¹³ Like Cole (2002), “I do not presume to speak for the fish” (p. 456). Metallic (2008) explains that “in Mi’kmaq I say ‘the salmon is my brother’. If the salmon is my brother, then he’s no different than my uncle, my cousin, my aunt’s husband who passed away” (p. 68). The voice of the salmon, as represented in this writing, came to me as thoughts and dreams during the course of this research and writing. Their voice contributes to the teachings of the research story by affirming the relationship between the salmon and the people and by providing another lens through which to observe human interaction within the Circle of Life.

¹⁴ Murdena Marshall (as cited in Native Council of Nova Scotia, 1994, p. 7-8) explains that “in every nation, tribe, or a group of people, there is a set of rules that certain groups function by. This set of rules can come in the form of values, customs and oral traditions. In some nations, there are known as codes of ethics. Under one or more of these titles, a society recognizes and utilizes these modes to better function within their own world. It is these rules that make one’s perspective of a world view so unique. In the Mi’kmaq world, these rules are known as oral traditions. To honour these oral traditions allow one to view the world through the window of tribal consciousness. It is through this window that our behaviour has been governed, a behaviour which is acceptable within our own tribal world. It is critical that we are

family and we all work with youth, both in formal and informal education settings. Since I came to the school six years ago, Jamie, shalan, Todd, and Tina have collaborated with me on numerous school-based projects that attempted to move an Aboriginal education agenda forward. This research is part of our on-going collaborative work.

As well as these intertwined voices, there is silence, “an important part of storytelling methodology” (McGregor, 2004, p. 387). Silence allows me to learn from those who do not speak in words. “I learn from the water and wind and trees and the moon and the seasons. I do most of this in silence” (journal entry, April 24, 2009). “Frank¹⁵ said that you can talk to the land and it will talk back to you after awhile. I sit in silence, not knowing what to say or if I would know the voice of the earth if I heard it” (journal entry October 10, 2009).

Locating myself

Researcher location (Absolon and Willett, 2005), “an essential component of the research process” (p. 97), is about being in relationship to the land, language, spiritual, cosmological, political, economical, environmental, and social elements in one’s life” (p. 98).

I have lived on the traditional territory of the Mi’kmaq most of my life. My home is situated on the South Mountain at the headwaters of the Mersey River watershed, an important local river. It also sits in very close geographic proximity to the headwaters of the Medway River watershed of which the Wildcat River is a part. I have

accepted in this world, initially. It is vital in order for one to survive in this world to learn this set of rules that has been given to us by the Creator.”

¹⁵ This is a reference to Elder Frank Meuse of Bear River First Nation.

a spiritual connection to the traditional lands on which I live and work, developed through the teachings I have received from Elders, including my maternal grandfather, Kendall Longmire. My relationship to the land, the trees, the waterways, and the life on this land has shaped my character and my commitment to Aboriginal education that is based in the local environment.

Like many others, my birth family negated any bloodlines or familial relations to the Mi'kmaq, choosing instead to live as if we were the first and only inhabitants of the land. Several Mi'kmaw uncles and their children (my cousins) were quietly assimilated into the family, identified as part of the dominant society by extended family members. It has only been in recent years that I was able to find my own Mi'kmaw bloodlines, through the tangle of Eurocentric denial that attempted to hide a Mi'kmaw grandfather in my maternal lineage. My marriage to a Mi'kmaw man when I was eighteen transformed my life. It was then that I was pulled into the daily reality of First Nations' politics and, along with my extended family, lived a life where the differences between Indigenous and Eurocentric¹⁶ views of the world were salient. My birth family characteristically attempted to ignore my husband's heritage until the birth of our children, at which time I refused to allow the children to be labeled by an identity based exclusively in European descent.

With the birth of my first child, Cheyenne, I claimed my responsibilities to the Mi'kmaw Nation. Since that time, "my basic loyalties and identification" (Ermine, 2000, p. 9) have been to Mi'kma'ki. "My children, and now, my grandchildren are the center of my life" (Lakota female Elder, as cited by White Shield, 2009, p. 58). It is through my life as a mother and grandmother that I foremost locate myself in my deep

¹⁶ I use the terms Eurocentric world view and Western world view interchangeably.

sense of kinship to the Mi'kmaw Nation and the responsibilities that go with it. It is from this location that I understand Cavender Wilson's (1998) description of her relationship with her grandmother as "a deep sense of his kinship responsibility, a responsibility that relays a culture, an identity, and a sense of belonging essential to my life" (p. 27). I embrace the belief that "the state of our nation thus depends on how we rectify the injustices to our children of the past and how we ensure the well-being of the children of the present and future" (Lawrence and Anderson, 2005, p. 6). The need for Aboriginal students to receive an education that is founded in Aboriginal world view¹⁷ is the impetus of my work. I am motivated and passionate to support the development of modern day Aboriginal education for our children (Battiste, 2004) and as a researcher, I am "deeply invested in [my] studies, personally and profoundly" (Bullough and Pinnegar, 2001, p. 13).

I attended North Queens School, as did my youngest daughter, Chkupan, and many members of my extended family. I locate myself as a teacher and a school administrator at the school and inside the public¹⁸ education system. It is through this role "inside the system" that I work to address the assimilation of our children through "cognitive imperialism" (Battiste, 1998)¹⁹. As a teacher and as a mother of Mi'kmaw

¹⁷ I use the phrases Aboriginal world view, Mi'kmaw world view, and Aboriginal knowledge system interchangeably. Little Bear (2000) explains world view as a "society's shared philosophy, values, and customs" (p. 77). World view can also be understood as a "cultural paradigm" or an "Indigenous vantage point" (Battiste and Henderson, 2000, p. 37). Michell (2005) defines world view as a "set of ideas, assumptions, beliefs, and ethical values- both individual (unique) and cultural (shared), which is that person's view of reality and which colours perception, thinking and action. It is both a filter and a processor (p 35)."

¹⁸ Public school refers to any provincially funded and regulated school.

¹⁹ "Cognitive imperialism denies many groups of people their language and cultural integrity and maintains the legitimacy of only one language, one culture, and one frame of reference" (Battiste, 1998, p. 6). Cognitive imperialism leads to cognitive assimilation and results in what Isbister (1998) describes as Aboriginal students learning to feel, act, and think like Europeans.

children and grandchildren who do not have access to one of the ten Mi'kmaw schools²⁰ in the province of Nova Scotia, I work for change within the public school system in order that they receive an education that “strengthen[s] and extend[s] their own cultural views, institutions, and communities” (Champagne and Abu-Saad, 2005, p.6). At this point, the newly developed Mi'kmaw Liaison Office²¹ at the Department of Education in Nova Scotia has only two staff. Any support these staff can provide is necessarily slow and therefore I experience the limitations that would enable students' Mi'kmaw consciousness, language, and identity to flourish (Battiste, 2005, p. 9).

I recognize schools as “sites of struggle” that must be transformed (Grande, 2008, p. 236) and I understand Aboriginal education as *sui generis*, or “a thing of its own” (Hampton, 1995). Teachers play a pivotal role in opening up the educational spaces to Mi'kmaw knowledge²² and in challenging the domination of Eurocentric knowledge in public school education (Battiste, 1998). I actively advocate for the development of education that centers and legitimates Mi'kmaw knowledge and I work to find ways to support Mi'kmaw students in assuming “their place as Aboriginal citizens and peoples in a global society” (Brant Castellano, Davis, and Lahache, 2000, p. 255). The students I teach are my children, my grandchildren, and my family. I have a vested interest in their education, an interest that gives me both a personal and a professional responsibility for their education.

²⁰ In 1999, the Mi'kmaq Education Act, returned jurisdiction for on-reserve education to the Mi'kmaq Nation. Of the thirteen bands in Nova Scotia, ten have schools within their communities (Mi'kmaw Kina'matnewey, n.d.). The small number of children and youth living in Wildcat First Nation makes it unfeasible for the community to have its own school and, therefore, the students attend the local public school.

²¹ The Department describes the mandate of the Mi'kmaq Liaison Office as assisting “the public school system through professional development and curriculum/resource development to promote the inclusion of Mi'kmaq content and perspectives in all of the province's classrooms” (Mi'kmaq Liaison Office, n.d.).

²² Battiste (2002) explains that “Indigenous knowledge comprises the complex set of technologies developed and sustained by Indigenous civilizations” (p. 2).

As an educational researcher, the teachings of Marie Battiste, a member of Potlo'tek First Nation, are of particular interest to me not only in the way they speak to the many theoretical topics within Aboriginal education but also because Battiste, a Mi'kmaw educator and researcher, exemplifies scholarship that has developed both through the historical context and within the present socio-political context of the Mi'kmaw Nation.

Locating the co-researchers

Todd, Tina, and Jamie are all members of Wildcat First Nation. Todd has lived in the Wildcat area for his entire life and is related to most of the people in the community²³. He is the son of Mi'kmaw Elder Charlie Labrador, the hereditary Chief of Wildcat. Charlie was Todd's traditional teacher until his passing seven years ago. As a traditional Chief, Todd is a member of the Sante' Mawio'mi, the traditional Mi'kmaw government. Todd is also the local band councilor responsible for the portfolios of youth and culture. Seven years ago he participated in the video, *A'tugwet*, which I made with students. It is about the Mi'kmaw history of the area. Both Todd and his children attended North Queens Schools. He is a traditional teacher and a guide to both Tina and me.

Tina is a member of the Acadia Band and moved to Wildcat six years ago. She is related to some of the people in the community and her youngest son attends North Queens School. Tina is an Aboriginal Support Worker employed by the South Shore Regional School Board, the regional education authority for the school, and she works in North Queens School part time. In addition to this position, Tina informally takes on

²³ Unless otherwise noted, the term "community" refers to Wildcat First Nation.

the role of liaison between the community and the school, and between the community and the band, regarding matters related to the local youth.

Shalan is the mother of two of my grandchildren. She has also participated in a number of collaborative projects with me. Shalan edited two videos, *A'tugwet* (Whynot and Moore, 2003) and *The forest and the trees: Teachings and learnings from the southwest nova biosphere reserve* (Moore, 2005) that I created with students. She is involved in this current research as a storyteller.

Jamie is a graduate of North Queens School and he frequently comes into the school to drum with students. He is a cousin to shalan, Todd, and Tina. Jamie also participated in the video, *A'tugwet*.

All four of these people are Mi'kmaw community members who, along with me, have vested interests in moving an Aboriginal education agenda forward. We talk frequently about opening education up to better support Mi'kmaw students and youth and we all have perspectives on the needs of the Mi'kmaw community as they are reflected through our own lived experiences and through our children. We collectively echo the words of Mi'kmaw Chief Darlene Bernard of Lennox Island First Nation: "At the end of the day it's about the children; it's always about the children" (Atlantic Policy Congress of First Nations Chiefs Secretariat and Indian and Northern Affairs Canada, 2006).

CHAPTER TWO
INTRODUCING THE RESEARCH

Explaining methodology to Crow

“That’s a really funny story about Weasel,” I tell Crow. “I wasn’t planning on you telling stories when you came into my research.”²⁴

“What were you planning?” he asks.

“Well, this story is about my dissertation research. There were no weasels involved in the research. If you’re going to help me, you need to be serious.” I continue on. “The first chapter of the dissertation should give the context of the research and explain what my research question was and how I gathered the data,” I explain.

Crow puts on a pair of glasses and balances them on his beak. “You have to look the part,” he says. Then he winks and sticks the end of each wing through what should have been the lenses of the glasses, almost poking himself in his eyes.²⁵ “Make sure you check out the lenses that scholars are using when you make reference to their work,” he advises.

I begin to laugh at his comedy but he turns my words on me. “You need to be serious,” he says. “Why don’t you read to me what you have written so far?”

I begin. “In the spring of 2007, I acquired salmon eggs from a local federal fish hatchery and raised them in the school so students could watch the hatching process and learn from it. The eggs were stock of the Medway River watershed, which includes the Wildcat River. As the time approached to release the newly hatched salmon, Tina was asked by the community to tell me that Wildcat First Nation would host the release for the students and teachers. All elementary staff and students attended the event where three hundred salmon were returned to the river in a ceremony that included smudging,

²⁴ Graveline (1998) explains that “To see a Native speaking to a tree or a crow does not carry the message of mental imbalance, but rather is a ‘scientist’ engaged in ‘research’” (p. 54).

²⁵ My father, Arthur Moore, made me aware of this trickster prank.

prayers, and drumming. Todd, Tina, shalan, and Jamie, as well as many other Wildcat community members, attended the release.”

Crow peers over the rim of his glasses, looks at me quizzically and asks, “How does that tie into the research you’ve just completed?” he asks.

I continue reading. “In discussions through the winter of 2008, Tina and I talked about repeating the salmon project again in the spring. Tina suggested that the entire project be situated in Wildcat First Nation. We discussed the idea with Todd and, in turn, he and Tina discussed it with community members. All agreed and we began to plan the project that was aimed at continuing to move an Aboriginal education agenda forward.”

“At the same time, I had completed my PhD course work and I was ready to develop a research proposal that would focus on Mi’kmaw education. In discussions with Todd, Tina, shalan, and Jamie, I decided that the salmon project we were about to undertake would be the basis of the research. Within the context of the salmon project, the research was to examine the dynamics of school educators and Mi’kmaw community members working together to center and legitimate Mi’kmaw knowledge in education. Battiste (2002) describes ‘legitimizing the voices and experiences of Aboriginal people in the curriculum’ and ‘recognizing [Aboriginal worldview] as a dynamic context of knowledge and knowing’ as two strategies to decolonize education (p. 20). This decolonizing work in education is referred to in other ways such as a ‘new educational consciousness’ (Cajete, 1994, p. 218), ‘indigenizing education’ (Mihesuah and Cavender Wilson, 2004), creating ‘spaces in education for making meaning and

achieving respect for Indigenous knowledge' (Battiste, 2002, p. 29), and 'animating the sites of post colonial education' (Battiste, 2004)," I explain.

I turn away from the computer screen. "That's all I have," I say.

"Is that it for chapter one?" he asks.

"No, I need to decide what I will write about the methodology; Indigenous research methodology," I explain. "Jimenez Estrada (2005) defines Indigenous research as 'applying the culturally-situated visions, understandings and directions necessary to engage in processes that ultimately facilitate and promote the well-being of Indigenous communities in a holistic manner' (p. 44). The research was to benefit the Mi'kmaw community (Smith, 1999; Rigney, 1999; Kovach, 2005) by using Mi'kmaw knowledge, pedagogy, and language in the development of education. My first obligation, as a researcher, was to the Mi'kmaq Nation (Cavender Wilson, 2004; Menzies, 2004). I privileged Indigenous scholars and theories both in framing the research and in analyzing it (Battiste and Henderson, 2000)."

Crow sits patiently while I type the words I have just explained to him. I continue. "Within the broad frame of Indigenous research methodology, I used an autobiographical narrative approach. Narrative methodology is grounded and legitimated by Indigenous traditions of storytelling. Narrative inquiry has a sense of searching and continually reforms the inquiry throughout the research process (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000, p. 124). Storytelling is culturally significant as a way of knowing and as a way of telling (Little Bear, 2000; Lanigan, 1998; Cajete, 1994; Battiste, 2002; Stiffarm, 1998; Bishop, 1996; Kovach, 2009)."

"Smith (1999) lists storytelling as a possible research project (p. 144-145). Cajete (1994) explains that 'story—in creative combination with encounters, experiences, image making, ritual, play, imagination, dream, and modeling—forms the basic foundation of all human learning and teaching' (p. 68). According to King (2003), 'the truth about stories is that that's all we are' (p. 153) and research that is about those truths is based on 'respecting the telling of stories' (Meyer, in Four Arrows, 2008a, p. 17). By using storytelling as a research methodology, I honour both Aboriginal traditions and the Ancestors (Thomas, 2005, p. 242)."

"In this autobiographical narrative approach, I established myself not as the object of, but rather as the site of, the inquiry (Chambers, 2004). This is consistent with an Indigenous research paradigm that is 'structured within an epistemology that includes a subjectively based process for knowledge development and a reliance on Elders and individuals who have or are developing this insight' (Hart, 2010, p. 9)."

"Absolon and Willett (2005) explain that 'the only thing we can write about with authority is ourselves' (p. 97). However, Bishop (1996) cautions that simply telling stories as subjective voices is not adequate because it ignores the impact that the stories of the other research participants have on our stories. Instead [as researchers] we need to acknowledge our participatory connectedness with other research participants and promote a means of knowing in a way that denies distance and separation and promotes commitment and engagement. (p. 23-24)

“You learned how to integrate and validate Mi’kmaw knowledge in education just by telling a story?” Crow asks skeptically. “That’s all you had to do; just tell a story?”

“Well, ‘experience happens narratively’ (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000, p. 19). When I tell the story of the research experience, I am relying on Aboriginal pedagogy. Aboriginal pedagogy recognizes that there are many ways of learning and knowing: dialogues, observations, experiential learning, meditation, prayer, ceremonies, introspection, dreams, reflection, and storytelling²⁶,” I explained. “Like Struthers (2001), I ‘prayed, dreamed, meditated, and listened to the spirits who provided guidance and direction on all components of the thesis’ (p. 131). I also talked to the co-researchers: shalan, Todd, Jamie, and Tina, and I participated in ceremonies. When I write ‘I’ in the research story, the ‘I’ is connected to ‘they’ (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000, p. 122- 123).”

“Crow, I also kept a reflective journal where I recorded my observations, thoughts, concerns, insights, and dreams during the research. I wrote in it at least three times a week for the duration of the research. In my reflections, I considered questions such as: How can a group of teachers and community members work collaboratively to develop education that is based on Aboriginal epistemology and pedagogy? How can Aboriginal knowledge be legitimated in education? What are the challenges, barriers, and struggles to this work? How can we work to overcome those barriers, challenges, and struggles? My reflections were drawn from my experience of working to integrate Mi’kmaw knowledge in the education offered at our school; from my interactions with

²⁶ Various indigenous scholars, such as Simpson, 2000; Struthers, 2001; Battiste, 2002; Ermine, 1995; Stiffarm, 1998; Kovach, 2009; and Hart, 2010 make reference to the way we learn and know.

others involved in the work; through readings, conferences and presentations that related to Aboriginal education; and as a result of my personal work to decolonize my mind and to further learn about Aboriginal education.”

Crow looks at me. “Weasel would be happy to share some stories with you. He went to school and he could tell you about his experiences and observations of schooling. Weasel’s stories just might help you,” Crow offers.

“Ah, don’t you remember that I am the storyteller? It might get a bit confusing if two of us try to tell a story,” I state.

“So, if you are the storyteller, then who is the trickster?” Crow asks me.

“Trickster? This is a research story, not a joke,” I emphasize.

“No joke! The trickster is the story character who teaches the lessons (Vizenor, as cited in Blaeser, 1996; Graveline, 1998; Iseke-Barnes, 2009). You might want to get yourself a trickster who can help you learn more about the centering and legitimating of Mi’kmaw knowledge that you are talking about. Perhaps you could choose someone distinguished, someone dressed in black; maybe a high flyer.”

“You forgot to mention that the candidate should have a big ego,” I noted.

Without giving Crow an opportunity to comment, I continue with my explanation. “The research began in the spring of 2008 and continued one full cycle of the seasons. In the spring we did the salmon project and then through the fall and winter we extended our efforts to integrate and validate Mi’kmaw knowledge in the school by offering a Native studies course.”

I stretch my legs, make tea, and settle to continue the explanation to Crow. “I will tell you the story of the research, the tale of our experiences, as four stories. The

first is: 'A tale: The learning circle'. This is the story that I most want to tell and the story that people anticipate hearing when they ask about the salmon project. The second story is: 'A tale: The inside out circle'. No one asks about this story and, when possible, I neglect to tell it. It is the story of the challenges we experienced when we took the collaborative work into the school. The third story is called: 'A tale: The outer circle'. In this story I try to reconcile the dichotomies of Aboriginal and Eurocentric world views. And the final story is: 'A new tale'. This story is about repairing our relationships in order to work together, work that results in a new story."

"You might want to advise the listeners that one story and one more story and then another story and another story is just one story," Crow advises.

"You just told them," I point out. Then I begin....

CHAPTER THREE

A TALE: THE LEARNING CIRCLE

The salmon project begins²⁷

I cannot tell you why the salmon left. Some say it was the dams on the river that blocked the salmon in the ocean, unable to return to their native homes to spawn and to bring new salmon life into the world. Some say it was the polluted waters. And still others remind us of the greed that has led to over fishing so that too few are left. I can only tell of this time as they come into our care and how we watch them hatch from their eggs. And while we watch, we gather in a learning circle and we tell the stories of the salmon and our people. We listen. We remember our ancestors and ceremonies. We reconnect to our people, to our traditions, and to the salmon. We repair and strengthen our relations with the life of the river. And when we return the salmon to the river we gather the people to drum, sing, and pray. I will tell the story here, stepping into the story circle in the east at spring time when the salmon were in their infancy and our work was in its infancy, too. And when I close the story circle, you will know how ideas hatch just like salmon eggs and how they both grow, gaining other descriptive names as they transform. In raising and releasing the salmon, the people recognize and strengthen their relationships and they, too, grow and change (journal entry March 30, 2008).

Preparing to watch the eggs

Watching salmon eggs hatch is a slow process. What do you do when day after day you look at the eggs and they are still ... well, they are still eggs? And then when the salmon do emerge, they are so small that you have to stare intently for a long time in order to see anything at all moving in the water, just as it is sometimes difficult to see change

²⁷ My conversations with Crow and the voices of the Salmon are indicated in the heading of the sections in which Crow and Salmon appear. My own voice, expressed through journal writings, is referenced at the end of journal entries in sections throughout the dissertation.

take place and ideas emerge. Listen and I will tell you the story of the changes that happened as we watched the salmon.

Several years ago, Todd worked as a watchman in the petroglyph area of Kejimikujik National Park and National Historic Site²⁸. During the tourist season, rain or shine, Todd was there watching. He was also listening to the lake, the trees, and the petroglyphs themselves. He told me how he reconnected to this place of his ancestors (personal communication, April 15, 2000). Like the salmon eggs, his growth may not have been apparent to anyone who met him briefly. And while the salmon eggs hatched, we, too, took a journey; a journey of recognizing and strengthening our relationships, and of remembering our ancestors and our traditions. The web of relations, throughout the research, extended our learning circle by bringing public school teachers and students into the Mi'kmaw community to join the community members in the learning activities that were based on Mi'kmaw teachings and taught in a way that reflected Mi'kmaw understandings of the world.

The salmon eggs come to us

We began the salmon project by learning how to create a good environment for the salmon eggs to hatch. A storage room in the basement of the Wildcat community store, the only community building in Wildcat and the only place where the twenty-five litre tank could be placed. Todd spiritually prepared the area by smudging it. The tank was set up and filled with water to acclimatize before the salmon eggs were put in it a few

²⁸ Kejimikujik National Park was created in 1967. It is located between Wildcat First Nation and Bear River First Nation, and it straddles the Mersey River. The park is a contested site as it sits on the traditional lands of the Mi'kmaq. A section of land inside the park boundaries are sacred lands as they are the location of both numerous petroglyphs and burial grounds. In 1995 the park was recognized as a "Mi'kmaw cultural landscape," as described by Parks Canada (n.d.), and it was subsequently designated as a national historic site.

days later. As much as possible we wanted to recreate the river so we used a chiller to keep the water at eight degrees Celsius, the spring time river temperature. We placed rocks on the bottom of the tank to recreate the rocky river bottom.

The Community decided on weekly learning circles in which to share knowledge and learn about the salmon. The learning circles were an experience of living, learning, and relationship (Cajete, 2008, p. 491).

We could see that each opaque egg had a small black dot in it. This was the salmon beginning to grow and as we patiently watched those black dots became larger and they developed tails and heads. Just as the small black dots in the salmon eggs grew, our sharing grew and our stories developed as well. When the salmon emerged from the egg, the egg sac hung off the underneath of the salmon for some time as it was a food source. The sac weighted the salmon down on the bottom among the rocks. When the egg sac was empty, the salmon could swim and each one was then ready to look for food amongst the rocks.

Crow's second story

“Do you know about Mi’kmwesu²⁹?” Crow asks. “She³⁰ watches the spiders make their webs and from them she learns how to spin the very delicate threads that connect all things. Mi’kmwesu looks underground and there she sees how the Plant People hold hands beneath the Earth, giving one another strength and support³¹. Mi’kmwesu listens.

²⁹ Mi’kmaw storyteller Gilbert Sewell (Grant, Martin, & Fukushima, 2006) describes Mi’kmwesu as a spirit of the woods; a trickster. I use a spelling consistent with that of Whitehead (2006).

³⁰ When referencing Mi’kmwesu using an engendered pronoun, I use “she” (Marshall, Marshall, and Iwama, 2010).

³¹ Elder Todd Labrador tells of his father, Hereditary Chief and Elder Charlie Labrador saying: “If you look underground you will see that all the roots of all the trees and plants are spread out and touching one another. It is as if they are holding hands. We, too, need one another and reach out through our relationships in the world to support one another” (Todd Labrador, personal communication).

She hears Water traveling through the roots and along the threads, carrying the Message of Life to all things³². Because she understands the ways in which all Life on Mother Earth is connected, Mi'kmwesu knows how to repair those connections when the threads of relationships are frayed and broken. When Glooscap³³ calls Mi'kmwesu to mend the tale of education, she goes to Kespukwitk³⁴. It is there that she begins to replace and reweave the threads of relationships." Crow laughs. "That's a mighty Big Mess in the tale of education."

"Crow!" I said, "I am using Indigenous methodology, not Indigenous mythology. Mi'kmwesu is a spirit. I can't put spirits in a dissertation. My research would not be taken seriously."

Bringing the school into the community

Locating the salmon eggs in the school would have provided the maximum opportunity for all classes to have daily access to the salmon eggs but there would have been less chance for Mi'kmaw community members to be involved in the project. Community members would have been welcome but it was unlikely they would have participated if the salmon eggs were located in the school. "Remember that it was only until recently that Mi'kmaw parents were allowed to be in schools. Parents are still not comfortable in schools" (M. Marshall, personal communication, October 23, 2009)³⁵.

³² Woods (Moore, 2005) explains that water carries the messages of all life.

³³ Glooscap is a spiritual being with great power, referred to by Augustine (2008a) as "The First One Who Spoke." Augustine explains that in the Mi'kmaq Creation Story, Glooscap's presence was one of the seven stages of creation (p. 1).

³⁴ The region of Mi'kma'ki where Wildcat First Nation and North Queens School are located.

³⁵ Mi'kmaq historian and Elder Daniel Paul (2000) describes the regulations against students speaking the Mi'kmaq language (p. 258), the refusal of the school authorities to allow parents to withdraw children (p. 261-263), and the many incidents of brutality that students endured (p. 264-266). In *Out of the Depths* (1992), Isabelle Knockwood describes the experiences of Mi'kmaw children at the Indian Residential School in Nova Scotia. Knockwood includes "lies about myself and my people" as well as "withheld knowledge" (p.158) as ways in which the school attempted to destroy the Mi'kmaq Nation. The school

Locating the tank in the community gave community members liberal access to the tank and this location situated the learning project within the Mi'kmaw community. Tina and I discussed the possibility that non-community members may not feel comfortable visiting the Mi'kmaw community. She mentioned that recently a service technician was to do some work at her house. However, he was concerned that he was not "allowed" on the reserve. (personal communication, May 1, 2008). Such perceptions were a clear indication of a tear in the fabric of relationships amongst people (Llewellyn, 2008, p. 188).

Inviting others

Tina and I discussed the project with the school staff. We individually invited them and their classes to participate both by joining in the learning circles and by visiting the salmon as often as possible. It was left with each teacher as to how the project would connect to the types of learning themes or curricula that he or she was teaching in the respective grade levels. If a teacher asked me for ideas about connections, I discussed it with him or her. On several occasions a school bus filled with students came to visit the salmon. They, too, would gather in sharing circles and along the river to hear stories about the salmon that were told by community members and the co-researchers. Joseph (2008) writes that "hearing one another's stories validates experience and feelings and represents a significant step toward restoration of the injured person and the relationship" (p. 214).

closed in 1967, leaving living memories of the school experience in families of present day Mi'kmaw students. The legacy of residential schools is still with us, casting a long shadow (Berger, 1999) not only over the education of Aboriginal children but also over the relationships between schools and First Nations communities. Hare and Barman (1998) remind readers that "school for many Aboriginal people is much more an object of fear to be avoided than a place of learning" (p. 340).

The salmon are drawing people to them. I watch as participants welcome, celebrate, and make a place for the salmon. It is very easy to see how we are creating a physical space for the salmon in our environment but it is also important to make a space for them in our minds. The creating of mental space is about being open to what we can learn from the salmon and what we can learn from each other about the salmon (journal notes May 7, 2008).

More and more people from the region were coming into the store to see the salmon. Todd, Tina, and I all began to realize that the non-Aboriginal community was also being drawn into the Mi'kmaw community and thus the project was becoming, as Todd said, "learning for everyone" (personal communication, May 8, 2008). The salmon project was both an opportunity and a means of engaging others in conversations about teaching and learning, and a path along which to move a Mi'kmaw education agenda forward. The learning circles were our gathering place and the salmon were our focus as we shared and discussed knowledge and values.

The learning circles

Each learning circle began with a smudge conducted by Todd. Graveline (1998) explains smudging as a ceremony for "purifying space and one another" (p.133). Prayers, songs, or ceremonies like burning sweetgrass or sage cleanses the mind/ body/ spirit to get ready to listen (Archibald, 1997, p. 134). We would gather around the tank, smudge, observe the salmon eggs, and talk. After talking, we would share food, drum, and sing. Each week we welcomed various Elders and Traditional Knowledge Keepers

to talk with us. They shared their knowledge which would inspire more sharing through stories.

In the first circle Todd shared the story of developing the salmon project and we both spoke about acquiring the eggs and what we knew about taking care of them. The talk then turned to others' stories of salmon: catching them, eating them, seeing them in the river, and the limited numbers that are in the river now compared to several decades ago. We all had stories. Those stories lead to other stories, perhaps about a gathering where salmon were eaten or about a fishing trip and the people on the trip. Iseke-Barnes (2003) explains that "in telling stories we honor the experiences of Indigenous peoples and epistemologies and the contributions made to multiple, collective, and collaborative readings of our world" (p. 219). She further describes storytelling as "a practice in Indigenous cultures which has sustained communities and which validates the experiences of Indigenous peoples and epistemologies" (p. 211).

I am watching the threads of interconnectivity being woven as we renew our connections to family, friends, and community. We were living the story of the salmon project and I felt part of the circle community. Baldwin (2005) explains that, "Life hangs on a narrative thread. This thread is a braid of stories that inform us about who we are, and where we come from, and where we might go" (p. 3).

I felt the presence of the Ancestors today. They came into the circle with the stories of things they did and things they taught us. In recognizing them, we honoured them. Graveline (1998) tells us that "we must invite the Ancestors and the other powers of life into our learning spaces" (p. 132). I thank the salmon for creating this

opportunity for us and I thank the Ancestors for guiding us (journal entry May 15, 2009).

Mi'kmaw heritage

On many occasions people spoke about their Mi'kmaw bloodlines; family relationships that had either been ignored or denied. Now their personal connection to the Mi'kmaw Nation was asserted through their grandmothers and their grandfathers. In the school there were many more students who were identifying themselves as Aboriginal. The number of students who self identified as having Aboriginal ancestry tripled over the previous year. There were also more staff members who openly and increasingly discussed their heritage. This spoke to me not only of remembering, but also of (re)membering the Mi'kmaw Nation. It is through the remembering of our traditions that people were remembering who they are; a recognition and a strengthening of relationships amongst people and a reclaiming of their lives (Cajete, 1994, p. 170). And with this, there was a (re)membering of the community; a bringing back of people who were claiming their relationship to their Mi'kmaw family and their place in the Nation.

Remembering our relationships

I pondered that perhaps the remembering occurred because people had forgotten their relationship to the land, Mi'kma'ki³⁶, from which our culture and identity stem (Augustine, 2008b, p. 45). We may have also forgotten our relationship to all the creatures of the land. Within the learning circle and our discussions of salmon, we were reminded of a core value of our lives: “our [Mi'kmaw] teachings are based on the interconnectedness of all things” (Elder Albert Marshall, as cited in Collaborative

³⁶ Mi'kma'ki is also spelled “mi'kmagi” by Augustine (2008 b).

Salmon Initiative Planning Committee, 2007, p. 17). Tinker (2004) refers to this as the “ubiquitous notion of interrelationship” amongst all things (p.108). He writes:

‘We are all related’ is not just a nifty idea. It is a way of seeing the world and living our lives. It is not merely a sentiment; it is a very real baseline of respect for all of our relatives [It] is rooted in an actual knowing and in a resultant respect for all of our relatives that make up this world.” (p.122)

Mussell (2008) provides a comprehensive description of the traditional way of understanding relationships.

Relationship is a key value in Aboriginal cultures; one must at all times recognize the value of the other and demonstrate respect and a willingness to discover and honour uniqueness in a relationship, whether it is with people, land, creature, or the Creator. One is called upon to be open to learning and to become changed for the better by the other; everyone and everything is a potential teacher in the ongoing journey to wholeness. In relationship, one must be willing to take responsibility for the impact of one's behaviour toward the other, as well as responsibility for managing and learning from one's responses to the other's behaviour. Each party in the relationship is equal in worth to the other, regardless of difference in age, knowledge levels, insight, or personal authority. (p. 336)

In the interconnectivity of all things, “man was only one part of a totally interdependent system that saw all things, animate and inanimate, in their proper places” (Upton, as cited in Prosper and Paulette, 2002, p. 1). Metallic (2008) describes that

in accepting that we have always lived from our land, in accepting that the land has taken care of us, we also accept that the land is a gift given to us by the Creator. By acknowledging the land in this way, we affirm our relationship with all of it beings. (p. 62)

Today I felt as if we were weaving our life stories to the land and to the waterways. The salmon eggs have inspired us to remember the places along the river system that are special to each of us. I recall reading Cajete’s (1994) term “ensoulment” that expresses the affective-spiritual relationship that Aboriginal people have to the land. Grande (2000; 2008) describes Indigenous pedagogies as fundamentally grounded in the land. So it is the land, and hence place, that are integral not only to our identity, but also to our learning. It is through our stories, shared in the learning circles, that we assert our identity and re-establish our connection to the landscape that reflects our lives (Michell, 2005) (journal entry April 7, 2008).

Our relationship with the salmon

Our shared stories included our knowledge of how the salmon are part of our lives. Kerry Prosper (Prosper and Paulette, 2002), a Mi’kmaw researcher, writes “the Mi’kmaq believe Kji-Niskam (a Great Spirit) created all things in nature equally therefore all creations should be treated with great respect. To ensure a proper balance with the environment, the Mi’kmaq practiced various traditions and customs” (p. 2).

Arguimault (as cited in Native Council of Nova Scotia, 1993) describes one such tradition:

It was a religious act among our people to gather up all bones very carefully and either throw them in the fire or into a river where beaver lived... All the bones of game we got from the sea had to be thrown in the sea so that the species would always exist. (p. 5)

The relationship between the Mi'kmaq and salmon is based in the concept of netukulimk, "the use of natural bounty provided by the Creator for the self-support and well-being for the individual and the community at large" (Native Council of Nova Scotia, 1993, p. 8). Olive Dickason (as cited in Native Council of Nova Scotia, 1993) writes that "historically, the Mi'kmaq relied heavily on river resources such as salmon, eels, and gaspereaux" (p. 4). Elder Albert Marshall (as cited in the Collaborative Salmon Initiative Planning Committee, 2007) explains:

The salmon was a revered species. Our people had to settle for the aquatic life that came to us. Before the 1990s, they were not allowed to take it outside of their own communities. As a food it was not necessarily more important than other species. In addition to food, it was used in spiritual celebrations as an expression of gratitude to the Creator for what he gave to us. (p. 12)

In the learning circles, we spoke not only of our right to have a relationship with salmon but we also talked about our "obligations that need to be respected in order to maintain our relationship — in balance and good order — with the salmon" (Metallic, 2008, p. 67).

Although it seemed like this gift from the Creator would last forever (Marshall, cited in the Collaborative Salmon Initiative Planning Committee, 2007, p. 12), the salmon population is now declining. Metallic (2008) affirms that the big salmon, the grandmothers and the grandfathers, are not returning to the rivers. As explanation, he writes that there is “a reason why they are ignoring you. It is a particular form of discipline” (p. 69). This way of understanding the decrease in the salmon population is different than the Western world view. These teachings were reflected in the learning circles when we spoke of the spiritual; both the life forms in the river and the spirit of the river water itself.

One of our ways of accepting our responsibilities to the salmon was to acknowledge the salmon and their role in taking care of our families and community. “Acknowledgement can be as simple as offering tobacco. Offering tobacco acknowledges the gijjaqamij of the salmon, the spirit of the salmon” (Metallic, p. 68). And so we prayed and offered tobacco, thanking the salmon for being at the center of our learning circles; for teaching us.

The salmon were with us a short time in order to teach us. Our intention to release the new hatchlings into the river was one way to celebrate the life of the salmon. Their presence in the river would be a way to replenish the river life; a rejuvenation of the river spirit. Our talk about the river focused our attention on the land and our place on it.

It is our right to be here, fishing and living from the land. It is the salmon that keeps us connected. The salmon arrives every spring and, with its arrival, we, the

Mi'gmaq³⁷, continue to live according to our ways: laws and practices learned over thousands of years. Life ways, ta'n getu telmimajultieg, are taught, shared, and practiced from one generation to the next. (Metallic, 2008, p. 67)

We talked of the traditional Mi'kmaw teachings that tell us not to take more than we need; not to over fish. Many of us told stories of Elders sharing this teaching. My own story was of an Elder who once told me about her father taking her trout fishing. She said that she enjoyed fishing with her father. After they caught a few trout, he would tell her it was time to go home. She laughed as she told me that she would always ask if they could stay longer and keep fishing. She recalled her father replying that they had enough for that day and that they must leave some for the next day. As Albert Marshall (cited in the Collaborative Salmon Initiative Planning Committee, 2007) now reminds us, "It is our responsibility to ensure that these gifts will be available for future generations" (p. 12).

Every day I think of the salmon and all the teachings they are giving us. I feel more deeply connected to them, to all the people of the learning circles, and to this land. By accepting my place in the Web of Life (Hanohano, 1999)³⁸, I acknowledge not only my relationship to all things but also my responsibilities; responsibilities to the salmon, to the children and grandchildren, and to all Life. In considering these responsibilities, I contemplate the impact of what I do, not only on myself and my family, but on all Life. I recall reading "let us not forget dams which not only destroy animals and their homes

³⁷ There are regional variations in pronunciation and spelling in the Mi'kmaw language. The spelling used here is from Metallic (2008).

³⁸ The terms "Web of Life," "Circle of Life," and "Sacred Circle" are all references to the interrelationship of all life and I use them interchangeably in this writing.

the forests meadows but they also heat us in directly proportionate ways to their destruction of life habitat” (Cole, 2002, p. 457). What have we done to the river, to the salmon, and to other people? (journal entry June 9, 2008).

The cycle of life

The cycle of the salmon’s life begins in the river where they hatch from eggs. Their early life is in the river, moving downstream and then into the ocean where they live their adult lives. They return to their natal rivers to spawn and lay eggs, and to begin the life cycle again. In raising and releasing the salmon, we became part of their life cycle as they became part of ours. Eels are also important to Mi’kmaw life. The life cycle of eels begins in the ocean, where they are born, and then they travel up the local rivers to live their adult lives. In the learning circles we talked of the similarities between the life cycles of the salmon and eels and their importance to traditional Mi’kmaw life- both as a food source and for ceremonial purposes (Prosper and Paulette, 2002; Collaborative Salmon Initiative Planning Committee, 2007). “All of life happens in a circle” was a common refrain as we talked. The learning circles themselves were symbolic of this circle of life and a reaffirmation of our interconnectedness (Graveline, 198, p. 132).

Spearing was a traditional method of catching salmon. Bear Nicholas (2008) describes how a Maliseet fishing spear, a nikahkol, was taken in 1914 from a Maliseet man who was charged and arrested for fishing salmon (p. 13). She writes that the spear was recently returned to its community of origin. However, the community members realized that:

we are at least three generations away from knowing how to use such a spear, that we no longer had unpolluted waters or un-dammed rivers, that we have been

stripped of most of the language needed for living off the land, and that we are forbidden now from fishing at all. (p. 33)

In our learning circles, we talked of other fishing methods such as using nets and fish weir. This, in turn, led us to talking about the construction of weirs and where some of the weirs continue to exist along the river. The weirs were made of rocks placed in a river in a cone shape, with the end of the cone downstream. A net or basket was placed at the end of the cone to capture fish and eels. Weirs are not easily recognizable as they may be mistaken simply for rocks in a river. Given the nature of the weirs, as well as their size, they were not seized as fishing spears were. The weirs are tangible reminders of Mi'kmaw traditions and their continued presence is a testimony to the Mi'kmaq presence on this land, the interrelationship of the Mi'kmaq and the salmon, and the resilience of the Mi'kmaq.

Fishing rights

In recent memory, eels have played an important political role in Mi'kmaw life. Frequently, during the learning circles, we discussed Donald Marshall, Jr. In 1993 Marshall, from Membertou First Nation, was charged with fishing eels out of season. In 1999 the Supreme Court of Canada upheld the Treaty of 1760 giving the Mi'kmaq the right to fish. Commonly referred to as the Marshall Decision, this historic event reaffirmed the traditional relationship between Mi'kmaw life and the land (Coates, 2000).

In discussing the salmon project with me, Albert Marshall explained that even more important than treaty rights is the necessity to exercise our responsibility to the

land and to the creatures on it (personal communication, October 23, 2009). It is in accepting this responsibility that we reaffirm our identity as Mi'kmaq and fulfill our obligations in the Web of Life.

Talk of the river

During one learning circle we walked along the river shore. Todd talked about his memories of salmon in the river, how numerous the salmon were during the time of his childhood, and how big the salmon were then. Other people contributed their memories of catching and eating salmon and they shared salmon stories that had been passed on to them from other people; the oral traditions from Elders to the next generation. These stories connected the past and the present through memory and contributed to the recovery of Mi'kmaw life (Iseke- Barnes, 2003, p. 220). In reference to a walk along a river, similar to the one we took that day, Kovach (2009) describes that “we embraced a way of knowing that cannot be replicated in the classroom” (p. 66).

Walking with Todd, we talked of our place here along the river and about the river system itself; the locations of rapids and the locations of still waters. Todd explained how travelling down a river can be a metaphor for our own life journeys; there may be smooth water as there are calm times in our lives, there are fast moving waters when life is more hectic, and there are very difficult times that are like travelling over a large waterfall. Todd also described how water is poured on the Grandmothers and Grandfathers in the sweat lodge and how the steam cleanses us.

I thought of the many ways in which water is part of our life and how we must do ceremonies for it. A Mi'kmaw Elder explains a ceremony for the water. “I do ceremonies four times a year- just for the water,” a recognition of the “inalienable and

inherent relationship [of the Mi'kmaq People with] the water, the fish, the land, and the resources" (as cited in Metallic, 2008, p. 63). The connection of ceremonies and the land is described by a participant in the report of the Indigenous Health Research

Development Program (n.d.):

as Indigenous people, the directions for our actions is advised by the knowledge contained in our ceremonies and oral traditions. It is this spiritual relationship to a land that provides our moral guides and can help achieve or maintain harmony. (italics in original, p. 32)

In the learning circle, Todd further described to us the water cycle and the seasons. He explained that in the winter the snow protects the Earth from the cold, in the spring it melts and the water washes everything, in the summer there is not much rain, and in the fall the rain comes back. He explained that in the Wildcat River there are places where the river water does not freeze in the winter. These are the places where people drew their water during the winter. Many people in the learning circle knew of these places in the river or they knew of similar places in other waterways in the area.

Today, between learning circles, I visited the salmon. Afterwards, I walked along the river and then sat by it to contemplate. Like Maclean (as cited by Wattchow, 2004), "I sat there and forgot and forgot, until what remained was the river that went by and I who watched. ... Eventually the watcher joined the river, and then there was only one of us. I believe it was the river" (p. 1) (journal entry, June 12, 2008).

Learning the language

During the learning circles we also shared our knowledge of the Mi'kmaw language. Little Bear (2009) explains that Aboriginal language is “a repository for all of the collective knowledge and experiences that a people, a society, or a nation has (p. 22)”. Those gathered in the learning circles were predominantly English speakers but the few Mi'kmaw words we knew were, as Battiste (2002, p. 18) points out, an important bridge between the Mi'kmaw language and Mi'kmaw consciousness. She describes Aboriginal languages as resilient because the spirit and socialization of these languages is embedded in the succeeding generations, even in the face of using colonial language.

The construction of knowledge builds from within the spirits of the lands and in Indigenous languages. Indigenous languages offer not just a communication tool for unlocking knowledge; they offer a process of orientation that removes us from rigid noun-centered reality and offers an unfolding paradigmatic process for restoration and healing. (Battiste, 1998, p. 24)

The connection between Mi'kmaw language and consciousness and the role of language in framing an understanding of reality meant that our focus on the language was a decolonization strategy (Iseke- Barnes, 2008, p. p.137). We learned the Mi'kmaw word for salmon, “plamu,” and the words for salmon eggs, “plamue'l wa'wl.” The significance between language and understanding is perhaps best described by Weber-Pillwax (as cited by Michell, 2005) in the context of her own Indigenous nation.

Woodlands Cree way of life involves cultivating a fundamental interconnected consciousness through the vehicle of education and through a common language with unique linguistic concepts that express and reinforce our thinking patterns, values and sense of relatedness. These in turn guide our social and individual actions in the ways in which we build our families and communities. (p. 35)

We also learned the Mi'kmaw word for sharing: "utkunajik." Prosper, Paulette, and Davis (2004) explain that "utkunajik is also a key aspect of the Mi'kmaq concept and practice of netukulimk, that is engaging respectfully and responsibly in all aspects of nature, including other human beings" (p. 8). The importance of sharing in relationship building is described by Michell (2005):

sharing and caring also build relationships of trust allowing an avenue where poisons can be exposed and discarded as part of the healing process. Sharing and caring must be done unconditionally without judgment as reflected in the spirit of the animals who do this with freedom and ease. (p. 41)

Talking and listening

There was much talking and much listening in the learning circles. Hollingsworth and Dybdahl (2007) cite a research participant as saying that we need to know that we have things to learn and that "learning from conversation has everything to do with making a connection with somebody else" (p. 152). The participants respectfully listened to one another as stories were shared. Quoting a Cree manual, Steinhauer (2002) writes "Respect means you listen intently to others' ideas, that you do not insist that your ideas

prevail. By listening intently you show honor, consider the well being of others, and treat others with kindness and courtesy” (p. 73).

Over time, more people came into the learning circle and we got to know one another better. “When we are sitting in Circle, telling our stories, sharing our learnings through experience and our feelings, we are establishing relationships among the Circle participants at a depth uncommon in the Western educational context” (Graveline, 1998, p. 148). It was in the learning circles that we met, learned, and developed our sense of relationship through sharing knowledge (Battiste 2002), knowledge that was more important than that found in a book (Ray, as cited by Graveline, p. 149). In the learning circles we were connected through our relationships and we were whole (Smith, 1999, p.148).

I am thinking of us as a group of story weavers, spinning threads from ourselves to one another, to the salmon, to the river, and to all life in the river and on this land. In the story weaving we are responsible to listen; an act of respect. And we are responsible to speak our truth; an act of sharing knowledge. It is not only that we speak, but that we also listen to others when they speak. Archibald (1997) explains that “patience and trust are essential for preparing to listen to stories” (p. 10) (journal entry, April 21, 2008).

Speaking our truth

Todd spoke about truth and its importance. He said:

I have a responsibility to speak my truth as I know it. I have a responsibility to share the knowledge that I have. My father told me that he would speak his truth to people and although a person may not have listened to what he said, he had to

speaking anyway. People often do not understand; they may not be ready for that knowledge. His attitude was one of being responsible to share the knowledge and then leaving it up to the other person as to whether or not the knowledge was accepted. We are responsible for sharing our knowledge and for speaking our truths. We are responsible for sharing the information that we have and for doing so in a good way. Even if others do not listen, one's truth must be spoken and then one must find a way to still work and interact with others. (personal communication, February 3, 2009)

Little Bear (2000) advises that "If you want to be part of the spider web of relations, speak the truth" (p. 80). One of the things I noticed in the learning circles, where people were accepting their responsibility to share their talk and to speak their truths, was that I listened in a different way. I listened not in a way as to filter that with which I agreed and that with which I did not; I simply listened. I tried listening the way that Archibald (2008) suggests that we listen, with "three ears: two on the sides of our head and the one that is in our heart" (p. 8).

This is the protocol of the circle; there is a time to listen and a time to speak. In the past, I found sharing circles difficult because I worried about what I was going to say. I was learning, in the sharing circles, that there comes a time when a person has "been taught and it is time for you to speak" (Metallic, 2008, p. 69). I became comfortable sharing my truths in a way that they, too, were put out into the circle with all the other truths. I became less self-conscious in the learning circles and with this I could more easily listen, with all of my ears, to the stories of others. Learning to listen, I was reminded of an Inuit man's (as cited in Lopez, 1986) response to encountering an

unfamiliar landscape. “I listen. I walk around it and strain my senses in appreciation of it for a long time before I, myself, ever speak a word” (p. 257). This is what the salmon eggs and the learning circles taught me: to listen and to strain my senses in appreciation before I ever spoke a word.

Through the stories that were told, we were not only learning about salmon but also about one another. We were reconnecting ourselves to one another and to the Nation through our words. Words have power (Hubbard, 2008); the power to change, transform, heal, and harm (Kawagley, 2006, p. 139). “A person’s word is closely bound up with the story that she or he tells. A person’s word belongs to that person and in some instances can be viewed as being that person” (Weber-Pillwax, as cited in Battiste, 2002, p. 25). In the stories that we shared, we were experiencing other truths of the world, which opened up the learning spaces to Mi’kmaw understandings of the world. The sharing of our stories in the learning circles, the truth-telling, was an act of decolonization³⁹ (Waziyatawin, 2005, p. 193) because Mi’kmaw knowledge and values were being voiced through those stories. The truths that were shared in the learning circles were not consistent with one view of the world. In reading Michell (2005), I learned how to understand these differences in truth. He explains that “the Woodlands Cree have always respected different perceptions of truth because spirit lives and manifests in different forms throughout the cosmos” (p. 36). As well as the notion that we are all responsible for speaking our own truths, I have often heard Todd say that he cannot speak for anyone else. Thus we are responsible for sharing our truth; telling our

³⁹ Battiste (n.d.) defines decolonization as “exposing [the] political, moral, and theoretical inadequacies of colonialism and culturalism in education” (slide 4).

own truths and no one else's. In Mi'kmaw, this is "ma'gisi'siwn ugjit wen piluweï" (Metallic, 2008, p. 61).

I have been thinking much about truth and oral traditions. It seems to me that when we speak we face our community and we are immediately responsible for our words. Hodgson-Smith (1997) tells me that "a speaker can more fully legitimize" her words, "more fully claim her authority or assert her intention" in person (p. 74). The immediacy of speaking our truth means that we are accountable now, at the very moment the words are spoken. The more I think about this, the less I talk because I am being careful with my words. I have noticed that sometimes my pauses do not seem like thinking time as much as it is connecting time- an opportunity to join my thinking self and my feeling self; my head and my heart. I now feel more responsible for being true, not to one truth of the world, but to my own truth. I am no longer afraid that someone will dispute my truth because I offer it not as fact, but as a testament to my experiences in the world. And I am more accepting of the truths of others because I do not judge the words of others against one truth of the world but rather I know them to be the truth of that person as he or she has lived and learned in the world. As others listen to the truths that I speak, I, too, listen and learn from theirs truths. I realize that the responsibility of sharing our own stories and respectfully listening to the stories of others is the basis of legitimating other world views. I reflect on how this sharing of truth is based on a different way of seeing the world than the classroom routine of giving students information to be absorbed. I recall van Renterghem's (as cited in Four Arrows, 2008b) assertion that "the prime task for a teacher is to bear witness to the truth" (p. 248) and I think of how this way of sharing truth is bringing all of the learning

participants together in a good way. Mussell's (2008) description of a healthy relationship comes to my mind. It is "two or more people interacting at the same level and sharing information in mutually respectful and helpful ways" (p. 332) (journal entry March 13, 2009).

Silences

As well as words, our learning circles also included pauses, times of silence, when we had the opportunity to think about the story we had just heard or to consider what we might add to the conversation. LeClair (as cited in Schneider, 2008) explains that "in the spaces of silence, those spaces where memory fails, the spirit of truth may also be visible" (p. 38-39). Experiencing silence can initially be uncomfortable (Archibald, 2008, p.88). I remember the long pauses in the conversations between my grandfather and me. During the silences, I would enjoy being with him- sharing time and space. Sometimes I would contemplate a story he had just told me and other times I would wait while he considered another story he might want to tell. Archibald (2008) says that silence can create "good thinking" (p. 89). My grandfather's stories were about the lakes and rivers in the area. They were stories of traveling on the water and of hunting and fishing. He told me of the animals, fish, birds, and plants that he came to know. He told me of the people who traveled with him: family, friends, and other community members whose lives were entwined with his. The silences in our conversations were respectful spaces between us. I watch Todd and other Elders in the learning circles. I know that they have learned what Henderson (1993) shares with others:

Generally, people rush in where there is a silence or a pause. You don't have to do that, but if you want to do it, go ahead if you have something to say. But it does get uncomfortable because in the tribal world, there are long pauses between the next speaker. (para. 1)

I was learning not only about the salmon, the waterways, and the land, but I was also learning about talking and listening, words and silence, and sharing and respecting. My connection to the people in the learning circles was growing through our shared talk as well as through our shared silences.

The voice of the salmon in the spring

From the River, we observed the People standing by the tank and looking at Our Eggs. Few talked to one another and we recognized that the threads of connection between the People were frayed and torn. While they gathered in learning circles, Mi'kmwesu opened the bundle of threads that she had collected from Grandmother Spider. We listened as The People shared their stories of life along the River. As they shared, Mi'kmwesu wove the threads in and out, repairing the holes in the fabric of their relationships. We knew these threads of connectivity were becoming visible to The People because we heard them talk of their Bloodlines, their Ancestors, and their relationships to all life on the land. And we smelled the smudge that opened each circle and we heard the prayers that closed each circle. Msit Nokmaq⁴⁰

⁴⁰ Msit Nokmaq means “all my relations” in English. Deloria (1999) writes that “we are all relatives” can be used as a research tool. He writes, “when taken as a methodological tool for obtaining knowledge means that we observe the natural world by looking for relationships between various things in it. That is to say, everything in the natural world has relationships with every other thing and the total set of relationships makes up the natural world as we experience it” (p. 34).

The release

I lean over the bank, hold the cup where the water is moving with a slow current, and slowly tip the glass sideways, allowing it to fill with the water of the river. As it fills, seven very small salmon take to the water and swim from the cup into the river. Other people are also releasing the salmon they held in cups. After the release we sing, drum, and feast to celebrate raising and releasing salmon into these waters. Their short time with us has allowed us to come together to learn. We remembered our stories and traditions. We reclaimed our traditions and knowledge. The release was a rejuvenation; a rejuvenation of our spirits and the community in which we live. It was also a rejuvenation of the salmon as we put the young ones back into their natal river and, thus, it was a rejuvenation of the river as the life in it was being replenished. Raising and releasing the salmon was an experience that helped us get “in touch with [our] Indigenous consciousness and the traditions that inform and animate [our] intimate and spiritual selves” (Battiste, 2002, p.29).

I consider what I have learned about our individual spirits. Each individual person has a spirit that reflects the Creator’s purpose and each person is expected to be “diligent and observant” in finding that purpose (Isbister, 1998, p. 79). Battiste (2002) explains that “creation endows people with sacred gifts that emerge in different developmental stages of their lives, slowly enabling them to find their places in the great cosmos and in their national traditions and ethos” (p. 15). According to her, people learn about these gifts through transmitted teachings and through self-knowledge, both of which are equally important. Each person has an individual learning journey that informs the person about his/ her gifts, capacities, and strengths. The journey is a

“transformational process of learning that animates students’ inherent talents and capacities” (Battiste, 2002, p. 30).

In the salmon release, we celebrated the salmon and their gifts to us: the teachings, the opportunities to learn together, the reminders of who we are and how we are related. In “deeply recognizing” our connection to all life on the land and the responsibility that each of us has, we acknowledge the dynamics of give and take and “action and counter-action” (Stewart-Harawira, 2005b, p.156). Henderson (2005) explains that people are only one strand in the web of life and that we are dependent on other life forms for our survival. Humans, however, were created last and therefore we learn from those entities that are older and wiser than ourselves. This learning takes place through the observation of the natural laws of nature. These laws represent the Creator’s spirit enacted through balance, purpose, peace, and harmony. Humans “exist to care for and renew the web of life, and therefore they must respect and value all the forces of life.” (p. 259). Maintaining balance and performing ceremonies are ways to sustain creation. “Renewal ceremonies, the telling and retelling of creation stories, the singing and resinging of the songs, are all humans’ part in the maintenance of creation” (Little Bear, 2000, p. 78). In this way, Aboriginal philosophy is “holistic and cyclical or repetitive, generalist, process-oriented, and firmly grounded in a particular place” (Little Bear, 2000, p. 78). We were on the land and we learned from it as we recognized and celebrated our connection to all things (journal entry June 14, 2008).

The release of the salmon took place as the high water levels of the spring runoff were receding. The salmon had all emerged from their eggs, lived off the contents of the egg sacs that remained attached to them, and were then ready to be released so they

could search for food on their own. The day of the release was organized to be a celebration of salmon life and a ceremony for them as they headed off to continue their life cycle. It was also a day of reciprocity as we acknowledged the salmon for entrusting their eggs to us, for bringing us knowledge, and for helping us to remember our traditions. The celebration brought together community members, teachers, students, Elders, and Traditional Knowledge Keepers.

One of the challenges of the day was to get the three hundred salmon from the tank into the river. When the Research Team discussed this, Tina suggested that we put several salmon each into clear cups and that every participant at the ceremony have a cup of salmon to release. In this way, everyone present was responsible for blessing, ensuring the safe release of, and witnessing the next stage of the journey for some salmon. Each participant held a glass of salmon as we prepared for the ceremony. While holding the glasses, people closely observed the salmon, excitedly asked other people to observe their salmon. Participants walked along the river to find a safe place to release the salmon, and, while walking and looking for a release place, they also talked to the salmon. This was a most profound time as people and salmon bonded.

Todd smudged the area, offered tobacco, and gave a blessing for the salmon in their life journey. Many people offered their own individual blessings, offered tobacco, and lingered privately in prayer before releasing their salmon. Archibald (1997) describes prayer as creating “a cultural learning process which promotes the principles of respect, reverence, responsibility, and reciprocity” (pp. 1-2). As this happened, I thought of how important these private times are; an opportunity to reflect on our connection to all other creatures. The release was followed by a gathering during which

we drummed, sang, shared food, and talked. Before leaving the celebration, many people returned to the river's edge to again check on the salmon, some asking aloud for the salmon to return when they are big so we can have a feast. These requests acknowledged the reciprocity of life; the interrelationship that is symbolized by the give and take between us. We raised and released the salmon to fulfill their life journey but we needed them to return to give us food for our own life journeys. It was through relationships and reciprocity that we acknowledged ourselves in the Sacred Circle. We had accepted our responsibility of caring for, asking a blessing on, and releasing the salmon into safe places along the shore. The salmon would reciprocate either by giving themselves to us as food or giving themselves in another way to maintain the balance of all life forms.

We connected with the salmon from the time of their arrival and even after the release we had a concrete sense of our interconnectivity to them. I thought of: watching them hatch, observing them in the tank, the individual salmon that I released, and their journey down the river as we drummed for them. I recalled reading: "I knew I had found what I was searching for. What I was looking for all those years, was connected with that drum and with those Teachings that I heard and those songs and everything that was being done" (Bourgeois, as cited in Rheault, 1999, p. 57). As the drums beat, I again reflected on my growing understanding of interrelationship; the way we are connected to the salmon and them to us and how we are all connected to this place. I thought of my personal responsibility to take care of the river and the water and I realized that I also have a responsibility to continue to do ceremonies for the salmon. Salmon, for me, was no longer just a concept based on their physicality. I was now in relation, and by

association, I also had a relationship with all of the other people who were part of the project.

It is early morning and my nine year old granddaughter, Laylia, asks me why there is mist rising off the lake in front of the house. I consider how I first learned about mist and the spirit of living things. It was the Mi'kmaw teachings about mist and trees that I had learned from Jean McIssac, a Traditional Knowledge Keeper (Moore, 2005). She said that we can sometimes see the spirit of trees in mist form surrounding the trees early in the morning or late in the evening. In answer to Laylia's question, I also consider a Western world view; understandings of the world that are exclusive within the school system. It is an explanation that I can easily articulate, having been schooled in this way of knowing. I contemplate these two understandings of the world and how the knowledges are a reflection of certain orientations to the world; one emphasizing the spiritual and one stressing the technological.

Elder Frank Meuse came to our school and told the students a story that he had borrowed from someone else⁴¹. It was of a young boy who was constantly getting into trouble. When he asked his grandfather what he might do about it, the grandfather explained that the boy had two wolves living inside him, a good wolf and a bad wolf. When the boy asked which wolf would win, the grandfather said that it would be which ever one the boy fed (personal communication, February 17, 2009). The story reminds me of making choices about where we put our energies and how we orient ourselves to

⁴¹ Guthrie Valaskakis (1993) writes, "it is the borrowed quality of Indian stories that stitches narrative to collective heritage, to a polyvocal past experienced in the present. Passed on through kinship and gossip, ceremony and social drinking, stories carry the experience of being Indian from generation to generation. And in Indian country, that experience is rooted in the continuity of a relationship with each other, with the land, and with non-Indians." (p. 286)

the world. In answering Laylia, I would legitimate a particular understanding of the world. We canoed across the lake and I shared with her the story of the spirit of the lake. I paddled and Laylia, hand outstretched, touched the mist and the water and we were part of the life of the lake. I offered a prayer of thanks for the water, the land, the day, and for my granddaughter. Canoeing and praying are ceremonies. They are ways of renewing and strengthening my relationship to the lake. Laylia, too, was part of the renewal of life and it is my responsibility to guide her in developing a relationship with the lake and all life surrounding it.

In the days following Laylia's question, I thought much about my teaching responsibilities at the school and the conflicts between my responsibility to teach the curricula and my responsibility to the needs of the Mi'kmaq children and families. These were often competing responsibilities. As a grandmother, I was accepting my responsibility in teaching my granddaughter and reinforcing in my own mind a resistance to the curricula that continues to colonize the minds of our children. I think of this colonization in the way that Calliou (2001) describes curricula: "markings made (un)wanted in public/private mindspaces" (p. 195) (journal entry, July 13, 2008).

Voice of the salmon at the release

The People watched as Our Young emerged from their egg sacs. We saw Mi'kmwesu reconnecting the threads from The People to Our Young and then she strung the threads along the River and into the Water so we, too, could be reconnected to the People and them to us. Mi'kmwesu braided the strands of thread together, making the connections stronger. Those who could see the threads could hear our voices. They shared the stories of our Elders passing on and how their bodies have nourished other life along

the banks of the River. The People talked of our lives, remembering how we are born in the River and return to the River to give birth to our Young and to feed the People and all other life along the River. We asked the People to remember that we are all part of the Circle of Life. We reminded them to recognize the contributions of all to the Circle, to respect the gifts that guided those contributions, and to accept their own responsibilities to each other. Those who heard our voices told stories of how their Ancestors did not take more than they needed and how they gave an offering of tobacco to our Ancestors who, in turn, gave their bodies to nourish The People. We watched them gather with their Young and their Elders and we knew the ideas were growing through the teachings that were shared.

We closed our time with The People with a Renewal Ceremony, celebrating the renewed relationship between us. The People sang and drummed to show their appreciation for our teachings. And as they drummed and sang, we reciprocated by performing a Salmon Dance, swimming together to demonstrate our gratitude for their care of our Young. Then our Young gathered in small groups inside glasses and observed The People who had taken care of them so that they would know the faces of those who had worked to reconnect themselves to us and us to them. We swam into the River and downstream until the drums and the heart beat of Mother Earth became one. Msit Nokmaq.

Reflections on the learning circles

It was after the salmon were released into the river that I reflected on the challenges of the project. The greatest challenge was inherent in the work itself. We were trying to center and legitimate Mi'kmaw knowledge within a Eurocentric context, two world

views that Burns (1998) refers to as being “in paradigmatic clash” (para.17). Battiste (2002) describes indigenous knowledge as “far more than the binary opposite of western knowledge” (p. 5). The challenge of the research was working to privilege one knowledge system within the context of another. As Battiste and Henderson (2000) explain: “schools still represent the hegemony of dominant Eurocentric knowledge, values, and expectations” (p. 91). This reality was pervasive throughout the research and presented itself in every aspect of the work. We were working to privilege one knowledge system within the context of another; teaching Mi’kmaq knowledge within an education system that is shaped exclusively in Western world view.

As I thought of these struggles, I remembered Jessie Sutherland. I met Jessie in 2005 when she was completing a M.A. through the Indigenous Governance program at the University of Victoria. Her research was in reconciliation of, and focused on, Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal relationships, particularly those resulting from the history of residential schools. *Worldview Strategies: Transforming conflict from the inside out* (Sutherland, 2005) is based on her work. In it she writes:

I became acutely aware that there was a tremendous amount of work yet to be done on the non-Indigenous side of our relationship- such as transcending collective denial, fostering collective responsibility, and learning how to build relationships of mutual responsibility. (p. 147)

Sutherland describes her own process as she “began to see more clearly how many of our strategies to resolve Indigenous – non-Indigenous conflicts were rooted in a Euro-Canadian worldview and therefore did nothing to transform the heart of our

relationship – namely worldview domination” (p. 147). She refers to the imposition of one world view over another in education as “an extreme form of oppression” (p. 147) and she expresses the challenge of world view domination as “how to shift non-Indigenous consciousness” (p. 147).

There were several aspects of the research that eased our work in the face of the Western world view domination. One key aspect of the research based on the salmon project was the salmon themselves. It was the salmon that brought us together and taught us. Gardner (as cited in Steinhauer, 2002) writes that “animals and fish are viewed as members of societies, which have intelligence and power, and can influence the course of events in terms of their interrelationship with human beings” (p. 77). We focused the learning on this creature with which we could be in close physical association and to which all participants in the learning circles could relate.

Another significant feature of the research was that every person had the opportunity to further bond with the salmon by releasing some of them. Both participants’ familiarity with the salmon and the opportunity for each person to release some of the salmon into the river highlighted our human interconnectivity with the salmon, thus reinforcing Mi’kmaw world view.

A third strategy to address Eurocentric world view domination was locating the fish tank in Wildcat First Nation, which validated the community as a center of learning and legitimated Mi’kmaw knowledge within the project. The community brought the learning activity to life by welcoming both salmon and school staff and making a place for them both. The project placed the participants in a learning environment situated in close proximity to the river, the habitat of the salmon. Mi’kmaw knowledge was further

legitimated by having community members directly involved in the teaching. With the salmon project located in Wildcat, the community was responsible for hosting the learning and drawing the school to the community instead of the usual situation of teaching taking place in the school. Ireland (as cited in Little Bear, 2002) writes that “... rural communities are built on interpersonal relationships and educational changes will be more successful if they engage in an ‘inside-out’ approach which builds on these relationships” (p. 23).

Little Bear (2009) describes the involvement of community as “a key aspect in the education of Aboriginal peoples. Because Aboriginal people understand the world in terms of relationships, the inclusion of community in the learning process of Aboriginal people is fundamental (p. 22).” Tina explained that school staff and students coming into the community to learn gave the community members the feeling that they had something to share. She said:

The salmon gave us a connection as community members and revitalized the community. We nurtured the salmon. It was a like a rebirth or a beginning. Frank⁴² used to tell me that when he was a boy the river was teeming with salmon. You could look into the river and see them. When we released the salmon, it gave us hope that the rivers will be alive again. It brought people into our community. It gave us a new sense of ourselves as Mi’kmaw people; as a community that had something to offer. We had knowledge to share with others. It was the rebirth of the community. (personal communication, March 15, 2009)

⁴² This is a reference to Elder Frank Jerney of Wildcat First Nation. Frank passed on before the work on the salmon project began. This instance of remembering Frank and his stories reflects how Elders teach us, even when they have passed on to the spirit world. In this way their stories are a legacy to their children and their grandchildren.

I understood this location of learning in the Mi'kmaw community and the positive response from the community as addressing the theoretical need, which Grande (2008) describes, of Native students and educators to have:

a pedagogy that cultivates a sense of collective agency as well as praxis that targets the dismantling of colonialism, helping them navigate the excesses of dominant power and revitalization of indigenous communities. (p. 236)

The enthusiasm of the salmon project extended beyond Wildcat First Nation and into other Mi'kmaw communities. Todd told me that other band counsellors asked him if they, too, could get salmon eggs and run a project (personal communication, May 21, 2008). Not only were we learning from the salmon but others wanted an opportunity to learn from salmon as well.

The salmon project provided many possibilities for reciprocity and sharing amongst all the participants, most notably through storytelling. The focus on salmon was relevant as the salmon are a part of the life of the river and they gave a context to the project to which Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal alike could relate. All participants lived on the land surrounding the river and most had personal knowledge or stories to tell of their involvement with salmon or the river in some way. Most importantly there were the stories and the related teaching from the Elders. Although some of them, such as Frank Jerney and Charlie Labrador, had passed, their teachings lived on through those to whom they had given those teachings. By sharing the stories they passed on to others, who in turn shared them, the stories provided "intergenerational communication of essential ideas" (Lanigan, 1998, p. 103). Holmes (2000) refers to knowledge that is

passed through generations as “blood memory” (p. 41). Todd, Tina, and Jamie all shared such teachings within the learning circles. Elder Frank Jermey’s and Elder Charlie Labrador’s stories were being told and their spirits were with us.

I reflected on the “interconnectivness” (Marshall, Marshall, and Iwama, 2010) of all things to further consider the salmon project. It is this concept that helped me to better understand how the threads that connect all Creation were repaired and strengthened during the work. It was the interrelationship of all things within the Circle of Life: the sharing, the respect, and the ceremonies that were all essential contributions to balancing the relationships within the lives and consciousness of all those who participated in the work.

The research was to examine the dynamics of school educators and Mi’kmaw community members working together to center and legitimate Mi’kmaw knowledge in education. Together we had learned about the salmon, told stories, listened to one another, shared food, learned, and released the salmon. To simply be together and share in the salmon project was a sign of improved relationships amongst the people. Our collective participation in learning that was based in Mi’kmaw understandings of the world was a cause for celebration. What I knew was that Wildcat community members were welcoming hosts of the salmon project and I also knew that school staff and students came into the community and learned along with community members. It gave me hope that there were ways to continue to build on this positive development.

The End

“You found the answers to your questions and they all lived happily ever after. The end,” offers Crow. “That’s what you’re supposed to say when you finish telling a Once Upon a Time story- The end.”

“That wasn’t a Once Upon a Time story,” I retort.

“Sure it was. Everyone is eating up that story. Just raise some salmon and invite everyone into a Learning Circle. They will all get along, tell a few stories, and live happily ever after⁴³. Now, how about another story?”

“Another story?” I question.

“You know, the one that came after the salmon project,” responds Crow.

“Maybe later,” I offer. “I don’t want to tell another one just yet. I am going to sit here and think for awhile.”

⁴³ “The power of the story is gone if you are not teaching it the right way. It will just be a nice little story, like the white man calls a fairy tale, a myth, and that’s all it’s going to be.” (Elder Ellen White, as cited by Archibald, 1997, p. 209).

Silence⁴⁴

⁴⁴ Silence is difficult to convey in a written story as fluid text does not adequately communicate the pause that is required to signify silence. Therefore, I have taken the liberty of reserving a single page for each silence, a deliberate strategy that is intended to signify a pause that speaks to silence.

CHAPTER FOUR

A TALE: THE INSIDE OUT CIRCLE⁴⁵

⁴⁵ Graveline (1998) explains that inside-out stories are “what the Western mind would categorize as ‘mistakes’. It is Traditional to teach through reversal, through Trickster tales (p. 218).” In my experiences in mainstream culture, mistakes are considered to be errors and they are to be avoided. Mistakes reflect negatively on the person making the mistake. However, mistakes are understood differently in the Indigenous world. Sandra Wolf clarifies that in the Indigenous world, “We learn as children that mistakes are sacred because they remind us that we are not the Creator and we can’t take responsibility for everything that happens. We learn by making mistakes. Indigenous learners are ‘trial and error’ learners” (personal communication, April 19, 2011).

Moving our collaborative work into the school

Fall was a time of extending the salmon project into the school by basing teaching more in Mi'kmaq knowledge. Rather than taking the school into the community, we would welcome community members and community stories into the school. This raised the concern of the relationships between school staff and community members. Would community members be comfortable and willing to go into the school to share their knowledge? How might any prior negative school experiences impact the traditional teachers? Would staff accept community members as traditional teachers? Would the knowledge of community members be marginalized or contested?

Jamie offered to help in the school and in the fall he came to the school weekly. In a discussion with him about the tensions between the school and the community, Jamie offered the following suggestion:

When there is friction between people we need to sit down and talk about it. Everyone needs a chance to speak. We cannot look at the participants in work such as the salmon project as Native or non-Native. We all want to teach the youth. We all want to make life better for others. But our community has to heal. Teachers can help us heal by teaching our history in the schools. We talk, we teach, and we heal. (personal communication, August 31, 2009)

I reminded myself that “successful teaching and healing depends on clear intentions” (Graveline, 1998, p. 132). I considered our work, our research, and the question: “why else do research, but to heal and protect our People?” (Cook, as cited in Indigenous Health Research Development Program, n.d., p. 55).

I am thinking more about healing and how I can contribute to the healing that so clearly needs to happen. We cannot have healing without respect and we cannot have healing without giving the individual or the community the space, the respectful space and opportunity to tell their stories. I recall Martin's (2008) words that the telling of a story is a way to begin the healing process. She describes storytelling as "one of the most powerful methods that I know to help begin a dialogue over what many have been silenced about" (p. 55). I think of how much Mi'kmaw history has been ignored and hidden by the history courses in the public school system and I think of Moses' (2004) words: "it is not like you can change the truth" (p. 109). Mi'kmaw history is what it is, even when those stories, those truths, are not told in the public schools. Watter's (as cited in Ireland, 2009) comment comes to my mind: "Every bloodied-nose that resulted from a racist conflict impressed upon me the dangers of the school's silence" (p. 20).

Today I realized that in addition to our responsibility to tell the truth, we also have a responsibility to provide the opportunities to break the silence so these truths can be told. Is that what healing is about? Is it telling the story and having it heard? (journal entry, August 31, 2009).

The work we were doing in the school was one way we could contribute to the healing and the restoring (Smith, 1999, p. 154) of a community. Little Bear (2002) explains that "the inclusion of [Indigenous Knowledge] in curricula will go a long way to restoring and maintaining the integrity of a people and its culture" (p. 20). What we were doing in the school was important, just like the salmon project situated in the

community had been important. We were working to decolonize education, which Battiste (2002) describes as:

a process that includes raising the collective voice of Indigenous peoples, exposing the injustices in our colonial history, deconstructing the past by critically examining the social, political, economic, and emotional reasons for silencing of Aboriginal voices in Canadian history, legitimating the voices and experiences of Aboriginal people in the curriculum, recognizing it as a dynamic context of knowledge and knowing, and communicating the emotional journey that such explorations will generate. (p. 20).

Mi'kmaw Studies

In high schools in Nova Scotia, the specific senior high course that would: raise the collective voice, expose the injustices history, and legitimate the voices and experiences of the Mi'kmaq was Mi'kmaw Studies 10 (Nova Scotia Department of Education, 2002a). I was excited to be teaching this course in the fall. It was only the second year that the course was offered in the school. North Queens is a small rural school with a total of about sixty-five students in three senior high grades (10, 11, and 12). The low student enrolment results in a limited menu of course offerings to senior high students. There are a number of required courses for graduation, including one senior history credit. Mi'kmaw Studies is one of three possible credits that meet this requirement; Canadian History and African Canadian Studies are the other two. Canadian History 11 (Nova Scotia Department of Education, 2002b) was, until 2007, the only senior high

history credit offered at the school and it is often mistaken by students, parents, and teachers alike as “the” required history course as opposed to “a possible” history course.

Tina and I lobbied for five years to have Mi’kmaw Studies offered in the school. The lobbying included us asking each year for the course to be taught, suggesting that in recognition of Wildcat First Nation in our school boundaries that it would be reasonable to alternate Canadian History and Mi’kmaw Studies on a two-year cycle. I made it known that if a student was interested in the course any year that it was not offered, I would be willing to supervise the course as an independent study. We also talked to students and parents about the course but most were convinced that Canadian History was the only way to meet the graduation requirement and that Mi’kmaw Studies would be either an elective course or an additional course. Mi’kmaw Studies was taught for the first time in the 2007-2008, during which time I was on a leave of absence to attend Lakehead University. I taught the course in 2008-2009.

More students than expected registered for the Mi’kmaw Studies course. Some of them identified themselves as having Mi’kmaw ancestry, some expressed an interest in the course based on their impressions that it was about life in our region, and still others declared that they chose to take Mi’kmaw Studies because it was “easier” than the Canadian History course. I welcomed them all and recognized the course as an opportunity to continue to move an Aboriginal education agenda forward.

However, I was concerned that the course was perceived as easier, a general notion that was both spoken and unspoken through out the school. As a solution to this dilemma, I set out to equate it to Canadian History. I was thinking, with single-minded determination, that equating the course to the legitimated course (Canadian History)

would, in turn, validate the knowledge within the Mi'kmaw Studies course. I organized this equivalency by creating a course outline and assessment protocol for Mi'kmaw Studies that paralleled Canadian History. My commitment to this process was confirmed in a standard form letter sent home to each student's parents at the beginning of the course⁴⁶. With this equivalency structure in place, I began teaching Mi'kmaw Studies using Aboriginal pedagogy (Battiste, 2002; Barnhardt and Kawagley, n.d⁴⁷.; Little Bear, 2000; Lanigan, 1998; Cajete, 1994; Kovach, 2009; Iseke-Barnes, 2008, and Hodgson-Smith, 2000). Apparently, I did not hear Crow laughing at me. He knew that "how you learn is as important or perhaps more important than what you learn, and Indigenous educational programs must use culturally inherent ways of teaching and learning" (Simpson, 2005, p. 380).

It might have been helpful if I had read Barnhardt (2005) in preparation for teaching the course. He reasons that schools can draw upon the rich Indigenous knowledge in their locale but that:

this requires more than simply substituting one body of knowledge for another in a conventional subject-based curriculum - it requires substantial rethinking of not only what is taught, but how it is taught, when it is taught, where it is taught, and who does the teaching. (p.119)

Rethinking the "when" and "where" of teaching Mi'kmaw Studies

⁴⁶ This type of communication to parents is a requirement at the beginning of all public school courses in Nova Scotia. In it, the teacher introduces herself, outlines the course, indicates how the students will be assessed, and provides the parents with the teacher's contact information.

⁴⁷

When I began teaching the course, I knew that the “when” and the “where” of the teaching would be the same as it was for Canadian History. The course was scheduled in a one forty-three minute period right after the mid morning break within a specified classroom. However, I intended to vary the location of the teaching by taking students outside as much as possible for classes. I would also take them on frequent trips to Wildcat First Nation and possibly to other places if I could arrange such trips. The trips away from the school would also vary the timing of the course because any such trip would take more than the forty-three minutes scheduled for the course. However, as much as possible such outings would be within the schedule of the beginning and ending of the school day as most of the students traveled to and from school on buses and requiring them to arrive at school earlier or sending them home later privileges students who can make alternate travel arrangements.

Rethinking the “how” of teaching Mi’kmaw Studies

I relied on several descriptors of Aboriginal pedagogy as I thought about how I would teach the course. I understood Aboriginal pedagogy to include: “learning by observation and doing, learning through authentic experiences and individualized instruction, and learning through enjoyment” (Battiste, 2002, p.18); learning by “doing/experiential learning, guided practice, detailed observation, intuitive analysis, cooperative/group learning, listening skills” (Barnhardt and Kawagley, n.d⁴⁸, para. 26); and learning through storytelling (Little Bear, 2000; Lanigan, 1998; and Cajete, 1994, p. 121; Kovach, 2009). I did not want students to simply learn facts about Mi’kmaw history but

⁴⁸ This reference is from a pre-publication version of Barnhardt, R., & Kawagley, A. O. (2004). Culture, Chaos and Complexity: Catalysts for Change in Indigenous Education. *Cultural Survival Quarterly*, 27(4), 59-64 that can be found online at: <http://www.ankn.uaf.edu/curriculum/Articles/BarnhardtKawagley/ccc.html>

rather I wanted them to experience Mi'kmaw life through authentic personal experiences that would include talking circles, ceremonies, musical events, and listening to the stories and teachings of Elders and Traditional Teachers.

Rethinking the “who” of teaching Mi'kmaw Studies

I was excited that the course was being offered in the school. However, I had not taught it before and I knew that I would learn more about what strategies worked and which ones did not work as the school year moved along. I also knew that I would be learning along with the students. I had a vested interest in having Mi'kmaw knowledge as part of the teaching in the school and I intended to make the most of the opportunity.

Re-examining the “why” of teaching Mi'kmaw Studies

The Mi'kmaw Studies curriculum may be viewed as an example of how the Mi'kmaw Nation is represented in the public schools. One could argue that it is an opportunity to learn from a Mi'kmaw perspective and that it is a step in the direction of legitimating Aboriginal voices in the public school curricula. However, as Ermine (2000) writes, “any bridges that have been built in attempts to facilitate cross-cultural understanding have effectively been appropriated by an established consciousness of Eurocentric thought that is intolerant of pluralism and difference as represented by Indigenous Peoples” (p. 4). Mi'kmaw Studies embodies a hope that the school system will open up spaces that acknowledge and promote Aboriginal ways of knowing the world, but, as I found out, the course faces what I felt at times was an insurmountable constraint - the hegemony of Eurocentric world view. As I thumbed my way through the curriculum guide for the course, I thought of Battiste's and Henderson's (2000) description of

provincial curriculum: “the mandated provincial curriculum continues to mirror a center that is not Mi’kmaq. It is a colonial curriculum with outcomes aimed to serve the needs of colonial governments” (p. 91).

It was implicit in my teaching that we would be taking up decolonizing work but I realized that students did not sign up for such work (Kovach, 2009, p. 64). Perhaps after being educated in a school system that is founded entirely in a Eurocentric knowledge system, the students did not have any understanding of what decolonizing work is. It seemed as if they expected the pedagogy of the course to be the same as all others they had experienced. It was in the disparity between what they were expecting and what I was teaching that we were all challenged. I struggled to engage them in critically examining the assumptions of their knowledge. Their struggles were apparent in their resistance to this work.

When we teach based on transferring information to students, we may make gains in training their minds to amass great amounts of information. However, we do not necessarily challenge them to think critically. Most of the students I have encountered have learned how to be ‘good students’ and ultimately how to pass from one grade or course to another, whatever the requirements are for such transitions. But I also see the insidious rules of teaching students to accept rather than question; to consume rather than challenge. I continue to reflect on what it means to teach and what it means to know (journal entry, December 15, 2008).

Crow's third story

"I want to tell you the story about Weasel and the running test," Crow interjects. "The story goes like this: That Teacher tells Weasel it is time to do a running record.⁴⁹ Weasel can run. He can run fast. He will run all around that Big Mess in education. He will show That Teacher. See Weasel run. See Weasel run fast. That Teacher says, 'Sit down!' 'Hey', says Weasel. He thinks: This must be a test for advanced runners. He sits on the chair and, with his feet gripping the floor, he moves that chair all around the room. That Teacher writes 'failed' on weasel's report card. That Teacher wants a meeting with Those Weasel Parents. 'That Teacher Talk is all about Teacher tales. That Teacher will have to listen to our tales before she will know how to talk with us', says Uncle." Crow laughs. "Those tales are very different."

"Crow! A storytelling approach to research does not mean that you make up animal characters and have them talking through the dissertation."

"You've got me talking!" he notes.

"Yes, but you are different. You are part of the data. You were with me through the whole research process. You talked to me and taught me. I didn't make you up."

My excitement at the opportunity to teach the course caused me to be somewhat naive about the challenges that existed. I was aware that how teaching is done is just as important as what is taught (Coalition for the Advancement of Aboriginal Studies, 2002). Many of the classes were conducted as sharing circles. Often there was silence on the part of the students. I wondered if it was the "respectful silence" that Dion (2009) encounters when she speaks to teachers and students about the relationship between

⁴⁹ Running records are a procedure to assess oral reading ability.

Aboriginal people and Canadians; a silence she explains as “grounded in uncertainty regarding what to say” (p. 55). It was clear that students were often uncomfortable with the silence. Monture-Angus (1993) writes:

Aboriginal people understand that silence is not a bad thing and silence can mean a lot of things. A lot of things can be said without opening your mouth. The silence itself did not make me uncomfortable, but the fact that everybody else in the room was uncomfortable with the silence made me uncomfortable. (p. 22)

No one spoke on the first round but, as I had learned from Frank⁵⁰, I thanked them for the moments of silence they gave us. There was a ripple that went through the room. It was a different spin on speaking at school. I was not demanding they talk in an attempt to answer a question. There was something new in this teaching (journal entry September 14, 2008).

Teaching the course

My teaching

My excitement to teach the course quickly turned to fear when I was faced with a classroom full of students, a curriculum guide, and my own experiences and thoughts. On some occasions I found myself giving information and sliding into a “teaching about” mode. I reminded myself that the role of Indigenous educators is to challenge schools as an agent of colonialism and carve a place for our own traditions as legitimate subjects of curriculum, but on our own terms (Mihesuah and Cavender Wilson, 2004, p. 2). I became overwhelmed by the task of teaching the course, coping with the

⁵⁰ A reference to Elder Frank Meuse.

challenges, and wondering if I was “getting it right.” I thought of Walter Lightning, of the Sampson Cree Nation, who wrote: “I have no idea what I am doing” (1992, p. 216).

In an attempt to make connections, I turned to the land on which we all lived. We discussed our connections to the land and places that are special to each of us. The students made maps of the land and the waterways, marking those places that were important to each individual. For many, the maps were of fishing and hunting areas and this, in turn, led to discussions of these activities as essential to survival for those who live close to the land. We watched *Are we at war with the Crown?* (Obomsawin, 2002). It is a film about the Mi'kmaw struggle to fish even after the Marshall Decision. The film highlights how fishing is a way of life and how it contributes to Mi'kmaw identity. In the film an unidentified woman states, “I will continue to fish and I will continue to hunt and gather. It's not just a livelihood; it's a way of life. That's what defines us as Mi'kmaq.” I discussed this statement with the class. It was a starting point that flowed into a discussion of our interrelationship with the land. Through this talk students better understood the importance of knowing and understanding treaty issues as they impact many aspects of current political, social, and economic reality of life of the Mi'kmaq.

I assigned students a project to interview Elders in their extended family. They were to learn about those Elders' personal relationships to the land and to collect family stories that related to the family's identity as it pertains to land. This strategy of making personal connections to the land, history, and lifestyle mitigated the students' resistance in the course.

Rocks are a part of the landscape in this region. The slate rocks along the shore of Kejimikujik Lake are carved with petroglyphs; a reminder of the Ancestors who

canoed those waterways and lived along the shore. The students and I learned more about the petroglyphs and studied reproductions of them, as well as petroglyphs found elsewhere in Mi'kma'ki. Several years ago, Todd made artistic reproductions of the petroglyphs by etching the symbols in slate rock. I did this with the students. In gathering the slate rock, I offered tobacco to take the rocks to the classroom and I thanked the rocks for the teachings they would give us. I sat in silence as I etched those replicas along with the students. It is the drawing of the sailing ship that caught my attention; a ship bringing change.

“Hi, what’s new?” I ask the ten year old. He is my friend’s son. They live in a small First Nations community and the boy attends the local public school as children also do in my community. I haven’t seen the boy in a while and I want to catch up on his news. He tells me about a speech he has to give next week in his class and all the research he has put into the topic.

“I’m doing it on an explorer,” he tells me. “David Livingstone. He discovered some parts of Africa,” he says.

“He discovered parts of Africa?” I ask. He reiterates what he has learned. I make another attempt. “Weren’t there people living in those areas already? Maybe he found areas that the Europeans didn’t know were there, so they said he ‘discovered’ them,” I suggest.

“Well he discovered the Nile River,” he continues.

“Really?” I ask incredulously. “Wouldn’t the people who lived there have known about the river?”

“Yes, but he found it,” he replies. After five years in school, he can now negate the experiences of other Indigenous peoples who experienced colonization just as his own Ancestors experienced it. The colonization of his mind continues on a daily basis at school.

His mother later tells me of the talk they had after I left, a talk about people referred to as “explorers” and why there are stories of them “discovering” places around the world. It is a difficult lesson and one that risked putting the child’s imminent speech into jeopardy. She tells me of the work she did to help her son rewrite his speech and how the task seemed onerous to a child who previously felt prepared for the presentation. This is just one of our ongoing shared stories of mothering; stories of un-teaching and then re-teaching our children in an effort to ensure that their knowledge and understanding of the world is strong (journal entry April 25, 2009).

In 2003 I worked with Nicholas Whynot, my nephew and a senior high Mi’kmaw student at the school, to do an independent study in Mi’kmaw Studies. At the time the course was not offered so I used the independent study⁵¹ option in order for him to acquire the credit. As part of that study, Nicholas and I worked together to make a video. Nicholas interviewed Wildcat First Nation community members. These video taped interviews were later edited by shalan and produced as a video entitled *A’tugwet: Discovering the culture that is immune to time* (Whynot and Moore, 2003).

I used this as a teaching tool in the current Mi’kmaw Studies class. Many of the students in the class knew the participants and the settings of the video. This familiarity made it easier for them to consider the stories that were told and to connect to the

⁵¹ An Independent Study is when a student takes on the course work outside of regular school hours and a teacher agrees to supervise, assess, and evaluate the student’s learning.

teachings in the video. It was only after much discussion that they could begin to understand that those stories reflected Mi'kmaw values and perspectives. The video gave voice to Mi'kmaw experiences at the school as the participants spoke about their years of schooling in the very building where the students in this course were sitting and learning. It seemed thought provoking for the students to see people they knew speak about their thoughts, feelings, history, and skills with which the students were unfamiliar.

I have been thinking back to the learning circles during the salmon project. Some of the people in the circles knew who other circle participants were to see them, but they did not know one another well. It was in the learning circles that we got to know one another personally by respectfully listening to and sharing our stories. Baldwin (2005) writes, "in the act of listening to story, we accept an invitation into experiences that are not our own, although they seem to be. Story weaves a sense of familiarity" (p. 7). It was through listening that we came to know one another, to learn from one another, and to share in the knowledge of each other.

This helped me realize that "relationship," the name of that connection, is about the action of "relating to." I thought back to the times in the learning circles when someone was explaining or telling something and another person would respond "I can relate to that (feeling, idea, or concern); I understand." When someone is able to say "I can relate to that" or "I know what you mean," they are relating to one another. When we "relate to," we are actively "in relation with."

I thought about being in relation with others and I recalled a talk at Lakehead University where Marlene Brant Castellano (February 28, 2008), a member of the

Interagency Advisory Panel and Secretariat on Research Ethics, quoted Willie Ermine, also a committee member of the Panel, as saying that, "Ethics is about how we treat one another. It is about relationships" (personal notes).

I continue to read Brant Castellano's (2004) work. She writes:

In the world of Aboriginal knowledge, a discussion of ethics cannot be limited to devising a set of rules to guide researcher behaviour in a defined task. Ethics, the rules of right behaviour, are intimately related to who you are, the deep values you subscribe to, and your understanding of your place in the spiritual order of reality. Ethics are integral to the way of life of a people (p.103).

(journal entry April 4, 2011)

Sharing the teaching

In addition to my own teaching role, Tina, Jamie, shalan, and Todd also joined me in teaching Mi'kmaw Studies. Their presence and their teachings legitimated Mi'kmaw knowledge and pedagogy in the course.

Tina's role. Tina was in the Mi'kmaw Studies class three times a week. She talked to the students about hunting and fishing and spoke about members of her own family members who continue to fish to sustain themselves. She also talked to the students about her uncle, a World War II veteran, who lost his Indian status as a result of his war efforts. Many of the students had grandparents who served in the war and they could more easily understand Tina's stories of her uncle. Tina also spoke about many aspects of the Indian Act and how it has profoundly affected her family. Learning about the Indian Act was not simply information that they were to take into their minds. Tina

made the Act personal. As a result, the students could more easily understand it and the implications for someone they knew and cared about.

Jamie's role. Jamie came in to the Mi'kmaw Studies course once a week. He smudged, drummed, and sang with the class. All students were excited to participate in drumming. The student-made drums were from a project a few years earlier when Todd came into the school to demonstrate drum making. The drums had never been painted so the Mi'kmaw Studies students learned about petroglyphs found within the Mi'kmaw Nation and then, in an art project lead by Tina, they painted some of these petroglyphs on the drums.

Although Jamie taught the students many songs, the most important song that they learned to sing and drum was the Mi'kmaq Honour Song. The song is about honouring and respecting ourselves and our Nation. A Mi'kmaw Grandmother (as cited by Metallic, 2008) speaks of the Honour Song: "I find it's a song that promotes respect and a lot of people respect it" (p. 59). It asks people to come together and help one another (J. Jerney, personal communication, October 9, 2009). The song teaches us and strengthens our spirits (journal entry February 16, 2009).

On April 24, 2009, Bear River First Nation invited the Mi'kmaw Studies class to a Mother Earth Gathering in their community. It was an opportunity for the students to participate in smudging, dancing, and talking circles. They learned from the many Traditional Knowledge Keepers who were present. Mi'kmaw Elder George Paul, from Metepenagiag First Nation⁵², explained to the students how the Honour Song came to

⁵² Metepenagiag First Nation, a Mi'kmaw community, is also referred to as Red Bank First Nation, New Brunswick.

him in a dream⁵³ and how he knew this was a song for the Mi'kmaw Nation. It was a memorable day for all of us as we sang and drummed the Honour Song with him.

Mi'kmaq Honour Song⁵⁴

Gepmite'tmej, ta'n teli Lnnu'ltigw,

Migmajtut, ge'mawita'nej

Gepmite'tmej, ta'n teli Lnnu'ltigw,

Migmajtut, apoqonmatultinej.

Apoqonmatultinej ta'n Gisulg

Teliga'lugsi'gw, ula ugs'tqamu'g

O way o hey hi ya ha

Way o hey o hey hi ya

Way o hey hi ya ha

Way o hey hi ya

O way o hey hi ya

O way o hey hi ya ha

Way o hey hi ya hey o⁵⁵

As I listened to the students sing the Honour Song, I thought of Crier sharing the words of a Cree Elder: “songs are an expression of the spirit, he says, songs are ‘the spirit making sound – through voice’” (cited in Sasakamoose and Waskewitch, 2008, p. 19).

⁵³ Tinker (2004) explains that “Indian dreams and visions have to do not with the past but with the “from-now-on” of the person who experiences them” (p. 121). He further clarifies that “this is a fundamental point that is not understood by white scholars attempting to interpret the Indian experience” (note 27).

⁵⁴ Note that Metallic spells the title as “Mi'gmaq Honour Song.” For consistency in writing, I have used Mi'kmaq as spelled in my region and, hence, in my writing.

⁵⁵ Mi'kmaw is an oral language. This written version of the song is from Metallic, 2008, p.60.

Rose's role. Rose Meuse, a Mi'kmaw language instructor from Bear River First Nation, came to the class and offered basic language instruction. We gathered in a circle, where, as Bourgeois (as cited in Rheault, 1999) describes "the line between teacher and student becomes blurred sometimes when teacher and student become involved with teaching and learning." (p. xviii). In language classes I struggled, more than the students, to pronounce words correctly and then to remember what the words were when I wanted to use them. Rose made learning the language fun and taught us the language for things with which we had a relationship- animals and family. Little Bear (2000) reminds us that "it is through language that knowledge is transmitted from the older generation to the younger (p. 82) and in learning the language, we learned more about those relationships. "Language embodies the way a society thinks. Through learning and speaking a particular language, an individual absorbs the collective thought processes of a people" (Little Bear, 2000, p. 78).

I learned more than language from Rose. One day she began the class and about ten minutes later a Mi'kmaw Studies student came into the classroom. Unlike the response that many (school) teachers would have given the student about being late, Rose simply thanked him for joining the class and continued teaching. Her response spoke to me of respecting the student and considering his personal autonomy. In respecting him, Rose strengthened the thread of connection between them.

Shalan's role. Shalan conducted storytelling workshops about fire with the class. At the first workshop, she came into the middle of the sharing circle wrapped in a fur blanket. She was Mi'kmwesu telling us the stories that only Mi'kmwesu knows, stories of the creatures of the woods and how fire is part of their lives. In later workshops we created

stories by going around the sharing circle and everyone adding a part. The stories, although of our own creation, were based on traditional style and reflected much of what we were learning. Even the most reluctant of students would add an eagle's call, the beating of a drum, or a moment of silence into the story line. "Stories teach children how to live well because the stories help children understand the worldview of their people as well as their purpose in life" (Eder, 2007, p. 280).

Todd's role. Todd contributed to the class in another way. As a traditional knowledge keeper, Todd has kept alive the skill of making traditional birch bark canoes. At this time, he was building a birch bark canoe in his shop and we traveled there regularly to learn about canoe building. The canoe was constructed of spruce and covered in birch bark. Todd began by explaining to us why the birch bark canoe is so important to the Mi'kmaw Nation and he showed us a very old birch bark canoe that his grandfather made.

Todd told us how he had gathered the birch bark for the canoe and how the absence of very large birch trees in our area makes it difficult to get a large piece of bark. The birch bark pieces were tied together and tied onto the gunnels with spruce roots. Todd explained how he dug for these roots. He took us outside where he demonstrated the soaking of the roots and the boiling of them in a large kettle over an open fire. He then gave each of us an opportunity to strip the bark off the roots and to split the roots. Inside his shop we all had the opportunity to sew the bark together and to learn about covering the seams with pitch.

The final step in making the birch bark canoe was to insert the ribs. We watched as Todd steamed the spruce ribs, bent them, and then put them into place. The class was

invited to the launching of the canoe on Aboriginal Day. I stood on the shores of Kejimikujik Lake, watching Todd paddle the canoe. It was on the shores of this lake that Todd worked as a watchman to protect the petroglyphs. It was here that he reconnected to his Ancestors and in teaching the students how to make a canoe, he shared the knowledge of those Ancestors with us.

Elders and Traditional Teachers. Welcoming Elders and Traditional Teachers into the classroom was an opportunity to celebrate their knowledge and to honour them, even though “the white western paradigm of formal education mitigates against the involvement of Elders in formal education” (Burns, 1998, para. 19). On one occasion I mentioned that we might learn about the place of fire in the Mi’kmaw Nation if Todd agreed. I recall a student asking me why Todd needed to agree. I realized that she perceived classroom teachers as the authority on what is to be taught, although she had some vague notion that the curriculum guidelines come from the Department of Education. I explained to her that it is important that we ask the Elders about what is being taught to ensure that such teachings are acceptable and that the particular information and knowledge are appropriate to share in the classroom. I wanted to ensure that we were sharing knowledge in a respectful way. I explained to the students that it is important, in the context of Aboriginal teachings, to ask for the guidance of the Elders as they are the knowledge keepers. They will guide not only the sharing of knowledge but they will also advise on who, when, where, why, and how as it pertains to the knowledge sharing. Burns (1998) emphasized the importance of “meaningful involvement of Elders in formal schooling as a new form of emancipatory praxis whose

aim is emancipation, self-determination and self-government within the larger Canadian context” (para. 19).

Through out the Mi’kmaq Studies course, the approach of having many Elders and Traditional Teachers in the class and looking to them for guidance in the teaching turned this class, in an otherwise typical public school, inside out. It challenged the legitimacy of the educational authority, the content, the pedagogy, and the concept of teacher. In this disruption there was an opportunity to consider the legitimacy of Mi’kmaq knowledge and values.

Respecting individual gifts

What I noticed about the importance of working collaboratively with Todd, Jamie, shalan, Tina, and Rose was that each person’s contribution was recognized and respected. It was with this intent that I worked to appreciate the gifts of all the others in the Mi’kmaq Studies class. We enthusiastically developed learning opportunities and shared our gifts, skills, and knowledge. I reflected on Todd, Tina, Jamie, shalan, and me working together and how we acknowledged one another’s gifts. All of us worked to open up opportunities and to make connections to reflect Mi’kmaq world view and the Nation. We each did these things in our own way. We each had our own style of diplomacy and we had different ways of connecting with people. When we worked together we were open with one another about what we were doing. This enabled us to connect to one another’s work and to spin the web of connections even larger. In addition to supporting one another in order to further benefit children and youth, we also all learned from one another. This is part of the reciprocity in our collective relationship-supporting one another and learning from one another. For example, Tina has great

rapport with students so she can often make connections with them in a way that none of the rest of us can. I can speak to teachers about curriculum. Tina and I often individually initiate communication with either students or teachers in order to facilitate the other person joining in and becoming part of a longer conversation; Tina makes pathways for me and I make them for her.

Not only did the Traditional Teachers bring their knowledge to share with everyone, but we as a group of learners also shared our knowledge both within the sharing circles and in the class in general. It was in this way that I appreciated the gifts of the various teachers. Shalan explained to me how she came to celebrate the gift of a colleague through a reference to her own struggles working in an environmental organization:

I've worked with her for three years and it is only in the last two weeks that I have come to realize the gifts that she has. Now I have learned to work with her in a new way. I have learned to consider her gifts and my gifts and how we can work together for the good of our community. And now it is going better because she brings her gifts to the job and I bring mine and we work together.
(personal communication, March 15, 2009)

"Sounds like everyone got along perfectly," observes Crow.

I sensed sarcasm in his tone. "We did work well together" I affirmed.

"There must have been times when not everyone agreed?" he inquired.

"There really wasn't anything to disagree about. Our decisions were always about how something might work best. What I noticed is that we all gave one another

space to try things or go with ideas that a person might have. It always seemed to be more a matter of supporting one another in our efforts rather than agreeing or disagreeing about whether or not to do a particular thing or to do it in a particular way.

However, I did learn about respectful ways to bring other points of view into a discussion. I noticed that Todd did not say “no.” Instead, he listened and considered what was being said. At times he would talk about other ways of looking at something or doing something. This is important because it says something about relationship, about sharing information, ideas, and knowledge, and it says something about playing a role in the learning circles. This approach speaks to how we can listen to the truths of others. It speaks of being open to what others have to say. I learned from his example (journal entry February 3, 2008).

Centering Mi'kmaw knowledge in the school

Mi'kmaw Studies was the focal point of a Mi'kmaw presence in the school and was a place to validate the knowledge inherent in this learning (Rheault, 1999). The course gave a reason for a smudging area that was accessible for anyone who wanted to use it. It was in the Mi'kmaw Studies class that students learned about and had the opportunity to smudge. The Mi'kmaw Elders and Traditional Teachers⁵⁶ who came into the Mi'kmaw Studies class provided the opportunity to reach out into other classes and curriculum areas with Mi'kmaw knowledge. Teachers were made aware of the guests who were available to visit other classes. This enabled us to continue to find the spaces where Mi'kmaw knowledge fit or was welcomed by individual teachers.

⁵⁶ We reciprocated the teachings given to us by the Elders and Traditional Teachers with gifts of tobacco and food, as well as honoraria.

“When are you going to tell them about the things that were not going well?”
inquires Crow.

“I’m getting to that part,” I respond.

“Are you going to tell them that you were struggling? Are you going to tell them that those struggles were coming from negativity?”

Silence⁵⁷

⁵⁷ “He [Vizenor] uses the word ‘silence’ itself repeatedly, the reader is required to imagine the scene, the heavy silence and its significance” (Blaeser, 1996, p. 22).

“Why the silence?” he asks.

I whisper, “This is ‘the kind of silence we are confronted with when we face the unspeakable’ (van Mann, 1990, p. 113). I do not know what to say or how to say it. My silence is my ‘survival strategy’ (Graveline, 1998, p. 185). It was not until I read Marie Battiste’s plenary address at the 2004 CSSE conference that I understood something about my own silence.” I slowly read the words to him.

We have found that teachers who attempt to bring forward the oppressive historical and contemporary experiences of Indigenous peoples in Canada through such courses as Native Studies and social studies find that breaking the silence of oppressions is fraught with pressures and emotional forces damaging to the lecturers themselves and to First Nations students. The resistance of white students who do not know this history counteract with guilt, anger, denial or racist justification for continued colonial privilege. In Native Studies history, as well as in courses such as antiracist education, teachers and professors find that Indian-white relations is constantly contested, and treaties thought irrelevant, a form of ‘passive violence’, making the work of Indigenous academics demanding, difficult, and embattling on all sides. (pp. 8-9)

“I never want my silence to be interpreted as me being complicit with such passive violence but, like Guno (2001),”

I have to pick my battles of when and where it is safe to use my voice. Sometimes I choose to be silent because either I am too tired to try and ‘educate’ others, or

because I know that my voice will fall upon ignorant ears that cannot hear me; and sometimes, my silence is simply a form of resistance. (p. 14)

“I was trying to find words and give meaning to the mounting negativity that I felt inside myself, negativity that I was beginning to project outwards onto others. I wanted to blame others, identifying the places of resistance with people’s names. I became frustrated not only with the struggles, but with my own style of dealing with them. I did not want to meet anger with anger because this was negativity feeding on negativity.

Silence⁵⁸

⁵⁸ Kirkland (2008) writes, "I was all too familiar with a curriculum of silence" (p. 164).

I continued. "It is ironic that at the same time I was coming to understand more about the importance of interrelationship, respect, and reciprocity. The contradictions inside me fueled my frustrations."

I thought back over the Aboriginal Cultural days that Tina and I had organized at the school on many occasions and similar events that I had arranged in many other schools in which I had taught in the past. Why did they seem to work well? Certainly the demonstration of skills, both craft and technical, by Aboriginal people is readily accepted in public school as cultural activities. Aboriginal people who do beadwork, make baskets, or build canoes may be sought after as their cultural knowledge is tangible and easily fits within a stereotypical image of "Indians" as portrayed by the media (Nelson, 2006; King, 2003; Guthrie Valaskakis, 1993). Perhaps these one day events were a welcome change from the routine of schooling. They were fun, they were informative, and students often got to take something, such as a bracelet, home with them. I was even more concerned that rather than challenging the Eurocentricity of the school, these activities could unwittingly contribute to a colonized view of the Mi'kmaq.

I've noticed that there is much conversation in school about how to manage a school and a classroom, how to implement a curriculum or initiative from the Department of Education, how to measure language (reading and writing) ability, how to measure mathematical ability, and the nature of learning styles. However, I have never been in an in-service or workshop where the purpose was to interrogate the assumptions of our curriculum. As the Race Relations, Cross Cultural Understanding, and Human Rights (RCH) liaison between our school

and the central school board office, I have been involved in many workshops that discussed how to make our schools more tolerant and how to bring multiculturalism into our schools. But I have never been in a workshop where the intent was to question the Western world view and its domination of our curriculum. I speak, but I am not heard. I consider how to string my words together in a different way; how to be more articulate. I now realize that it is not my words, it is the “cognitive imperialism” (Battiste, 1998) that shuts me out. It is the turmoil that would occur to the order of our society if teachers began to question the assumptions underlying the public school curricula. I continue to speak in hopes that one person will hear me and join the conversation to pry open a space for other ways of knowing; other truths (journal entry, April 14, 2009).

I reviewed the salmon project in my head. It was not based on a demonstration of cultural skill but my creeping cynicism convinced me that perhaps the project could have been understood by educators as a field trip event. It was interesting and informative and everyone got a break from school for the day to participate in an activity that could easily be rationalized within a science curriculum. Certainly the care of the salmon eggs and the release of the salmon were positive learning experiences. However, in speaking my truth, there were very few classes that participated in the project. There were very few who took up the invitation... really ... only two teachers came with their classes. There were also the students who were members of the environmental club, an extra curricular group that has a keen interest in environmental issues. They came to the salmon project and regularly participated in the learning

circles. But then I was the teacher so this group did not represent any other teachers joining the circle.

As a course inside the school, Mi'kmaw Studies challenged knowledge and demanded validation in the teachings it offered. As an option alongside other Western knowledge based history courses, Mi'kmaw Studies could easily be marginalized and the teacher and students who were involved in the course could also be marginalized. I thought of Smith's (1999) description of how Indigenous research can be excluded and dismissed. "The research community has a number of terms which are used to good effect as exclusionary devices to dismiss the challenges made from outside the fold. Research can be judged as 'not rigorous', 'not robust', 'not real', 'not theorized', 'not valid', 'not reliable'" (p.140). I recognized that this is what schools can do to Aboriginal education initiatives, dismiss them as 'not real', 'not up to standards', 'not relevant', 'not educational', 'not structured'. So, perhaps my cynicism and its companion-negativity- were understandable. Perhaps there was reason to feel frustrated and discouraged.

Crow's fourth story

"Did I ever tell you about Weasel getting fed up with school? He is so frustrated that he leaves school. Weasel wants to get away from that Big Mess in education so he gives up on that tale and those promises and he starts for home. Principal finds Weasel and takes him right back. 'You're in Big Trouble', says Principal. Principal calls Weasel's Parents. 'Weasel is in Big Trouble', says Principal. 'He made a Big Mess in the tale of education. Big Messes might be OK for Weasel tales but they are not OK for the tales of

education. You are his parents. You tell Weasel not to make Big Messes in the tales of education.’” Crow laughs, “That Big Mess is getting bigger.”

“Crow ! I am writing you out of this dissertation. Go somewhere else!”

The struggle to teach

In teaching Mi'kmaw Studies, I was frustrated by my lack of knowledge, which was magnified as I became painfully more aware of how colonized my own consciousness was. The course was finally in the school but I was struggling with how I was teaching it, how it was being received, and the overall impact it was having, or failing to have, in the school. I was also teaching grade eight science. I wanted my teaching in this class to also reflect Mi'kmaw knowledge and world view. I have no formal training in science and the double challenge that I took on, of teaching the course as well as attempting to teach it from a Mi'kmaw perspective, overwhelmed me. I did not have knowledge to share in either Aboriginal or Western world view. I felt that my only choice was a default strategy- teaching the science course curriculum from a Western world view. This situation frustrated me but it also helped me to appreciate how difficult a task it is to ask teachers to reflect Aboriginal world view in their teaching when they, themselves, have no knowledge on which to draw. When schools do not have a collaborative working relationship with Aboriginal communities, it means there are also no Elders or Traditional Teachers to support such teaching.

As the school year progressed, I became more exhausted. Graveline (1998) reminded me that “it takes time, patience, and perseverance to teach in Traditional ways” (p. 250). I had no energy left for the work that was my passion. I went to a healer who told me there were blocks inside of me and that my energy was not flowing through

my body. In working with him, I recognized that holding negativity inside me was a block. I thought of the salmon and how they, too, get blocked when the rivers are dammed.

In February 2008 I attended a conference of the Indigenous Cooperative on the Environment (ICE) hosted by Bear River First Nation. It was there that I met Elder Besha Blondin from the Dene Nation. She explained that people who are angry will often direct their anger towards someone else and that rather than taking on that anger, she gives it back to the person (personal communication, January 16, 2008). On other occasions I have heard Elder Frank Meuse say that we cannot be responsible for carrying other people's emotional burdens (personal communication, October 10, 2008). I talked to Todd about my negativity (personal communication, February 3, 2009). He reminded me to smudge both before and after I work. The words of a Mi'kmaw Elder come back to me: "I let sweetgrass be feathered over my entire being for spiritual cleansing and allow the smoke to carry my prayers into the heavens. I am a Mi'kmaq, and this is how we pray." Augustine (2000, p. A 17). The prayers and the smell of the sweetgrass calmed my mind. Pavel (2005) describes the affect of smudging:

Our sense of smell, stimulated by the burning of incense⁵⁹, can induce a powerful learning experience because it prepares the mind to receive specific information.... Aromas invoke memories of our past that transcend our own childhood to encompass the memories of our ancestors. (p. 132)

While I smudged at the beginning and end of each day, I remembered my connections to the land and all things on it. I recalled Todd saying that his father

⁵⁹ "Incense" is a reference to the traditional medicines.

described the land here as having to heal (February 3, 2009). Even though I was exhausted and in need of my own healing, it had never occurred to me that all of life, at times, may need to heal and repair. If we humans negate our interconnectivity, then perhaps we absolve ourselves of any responsibility in the healing of other entities. I realized that even though the land needs to heal, I can still learn from it and from all the creatures on it.

The wood tick story

I am thinking back to the time I was talking to Todd inside the store after the salmon release. A student, fearful of wood ticks, finds one on her arm and asks Todd to take it. Todd holds it between his thumb and forefinger for quite a while as we talk. As a child I learned to tear wood tick in two pieces as a way to destroy this small, but generally loathed creature. Todd doesn't have much for fingernails so I offer to tear it in two for him. He simply answers that he is going to release it outside when he leaves. Such a simple statement and yet it speaks so powerfully to his own sense of interconnectivity and the importance of all creatures in the Web of Life. I realize that not only am I disconnected from the wood tick but through out my life I have ensured that each one I come in contact with meets a violent demise, all the more perplexing given that I neither dislike nor am I fearful of wood ticks. And when I read Moore's (as cited by Hart, 2010) description of respect as "to take care to never mistreat any form of life" (p. 10), I knew that I did not respect wood ticks. Respect has always been a word that easily rolls off my tongue and out of my mouth as I constantly remind students to respect themselves, each other, and their surroundings.

The very small wood tick causes me to think deeply about my interactions with all the entities in the world and to examine how I see myself in the web of

interconnectedness. It is easy to talk about the Sacred Web, but how do I live it? My perceptions of my place in the web are reflected in my responses to every other life. If I do not see myself in relation to the wood tick, then my actions toward it denies and further destroys the connection that does exist. I know this in my head and yet I do not live it. I read Hodgson-Smith (1997). She writes: "In the Sacred Circle of Life, seeing oneself in relation to all of creation is an individual act, governed by one's own judgement of responsibility and respect, reflective of individual knowledge of the life force" (p. 101). I realize just how little I know; how very little. I now realize that when I teach about any aspect of life with which I am disconnected, I teach in a way that negates any relationship, teaching about the entity as a thing to be dissected and objectified. I now recognize that how I understand the Sacred Web is the foundation of my learning and my teaching... but I also realize that this recognition may only be in my head. I need to live it as well as "know it" (journal entry August 31, 2008).

Connection to the land

I thought of the ceremony several years ago when we gathered to plant a tree in honour of Todd's father, Charlie Labrador, on the very land that Charlie identified as needing to heal. This is the land around Kejimikujik Lake, a land used, as Todd explained to me, "since time immemorial" (personal communication, April 15, 2000). The land was later used as the site of a fishing and hunting lodge, and then appropriated as a national park. It was here, close to the burial grounds within the park, that Todd planted the black ash tree in memory of his father. At the planting ceremony, we gathered to nurture and nourish life on this contested land. The notions of gathering, nurturing, and nourishing life were the same three concepts that were present in the salmon project. We gathered

in the learning circles, nurtured the salmon eggs as well as our own spirits, and provided nourishment to heal the relationships between the members of the Mi'kmaw community and people in the school.

I remembered Jamie describing his connection to the land: “my roots are so deep that I cannot be moved. We are all connected like tree roots and we are all family” (personal communication, August 31, 2009). In Mi'kmaw, this is “tet tle' iawultigw” meaning “we belong to this territory” (Metallic, 2008, p.60). In working to heal the land, I was reminded of my connection to it and to all the creatures on it. I thought about the interconnectivity of all life and my responsibility to my relationships. In remembering, my spirit was nurtured and my place in the Sacred Circle was reaffirmed. Thus the land was a source of healing and rejuvenation for me. However, there seemed to be a gap between my personal life and practices and my efforts and abilities to teach Mi'kmaw Studies.

I thought of how little I understood Mi'kmaw teachings of the world. I understood enough to want education to change for my children, my grandchildren, and for all Mi'kmaw children. I did not know enough to write a curriculum based in Mi'kmaw knowledge, but enough to occasionally do an interesting project- be it a series of Aboriginal day workshops lead by Mi'kmaw Elders and Traditional Teachers or enough to create the salmon project... but not enough to teach the Mi'kmaw Studies class without sometimes feeling as if I had slipped into a Eurocentric style of teaching “about” the Mi'kmaq. I felt trapped in a Eurocentric thinking pattern and I knew that before I could work for changes elsewhere, I had to make changes in my own thinking.

Inverting my mind

Ermine (2000) explains how he inverts “everything being discussed to see what the inversion produces” (p. 80), a process similar to Graveline (1998) acknowledging and interrogating her own “internalized acculturation.” (p. 250). I decided to interrogate my own consciousness to see what I might learn.

I reconsidered my cynicism and frustration. Even given my concern that the Mi’kmaw knowledge inherent in the salmon project could have been subsumed within the Eurocentric curriculum and that participation in the project could have been rationalized as a field trip, it was reasonable to suppose that the teachers who did participate had a good heart and an open mind to the Mi’kmaw teachings and that they were willing or interested in joining the circle to develop Mi’kmaw education. I reminded myself that inviting staff and community members to participate was a respectful way of welcoming people into the circle. Those who accepted the invitation, be it one person or many people, were there with a genuine interest and willingness to participate. I recalled the many Aboriginal events I have attended over the years where an Elder or Traditional Teacher would say that it did not matter if there was one person in the room or if the room was full, they would share their stories with those who came to listen.

I realized there was a part of me that always wanted to do more; to push the work; to have things happen now. I discussed this with shalan and she responded with knowledge passed on to her from an Elder.

I was thinking about the time scale... how you and I want things to happen much faster... we know where to go and how to get there... but the communities need

more time to develop and grow, and heal, and build capacity. We are walking the line between patience and complacency for change. We must build patience into our approach, while seeing that it is the ideas themselves that are the catalyst. As we work, we must understand that seemingly slow moving change may meet the needs and challenges of the community. We can't push too much or too fast because ideas themselves have their own time. That's what I have learned. (personal communication, July 9, 2009)

This sounded much like Ireland's (2009) reminder that colonization has taken place over 500 years and that it will take time to decolonize. "You need to accept that this is not going to happen in your lifetime, all you can do is get on the path and walk in the right direction" (p. 74). I expected that the time it takes to create change is equally reflective of working in schools to bring Mi'kmaw knowledge to education. I needed to walk the line between complacency and my own impatience. I asked myself if I "walk my talk" (Graveline, 1998), was I living the foundational Aboriginal understanding that all of life is interconnected? Was I working alongside Mi'kmawes to repair and strengthen the threads of interconnectivity? Was I in "good and right relations" (Hodgson-Smith, 1997) with those whom I was welcoming into the circle to bring Mi'kmaw knowledge into education? When I reached out to hold the hands of those coming into the circle, did I do so with my heart and my spirit as well as with my hands and my head?

My self interrogation led me to the recollection of a recent gathering. We were going to have a round dance, which began quickly before I was able to grasp the hand of a young woman several widths away from me. We were both dancing and stretching our

arms as much as possible to close the circle, ensuring that everyone was connected. Finally our finger tips touched, and then our hands clasped, we smiled at one another, and continued to dance. I reasoned that, in the work at the school, I could only reach as far as I could reach and I could only do what I knew how to do. I paraphrased Stan Wilson when I reminded myself that even if I did not know how to do something, I must, when asked, do it the best way that I know how (as cited in Steinhauer, 2002, p. 69). I was doing the best that I knew how in teaching Mi'kmaw Studies and in working to develop Mi'kmaw education initiatives.

Todd has told me, on many occasions, that each person can only do what she or he can do and that others have to join in the work. As well, Frank Meuse has explained that we each have to be responsible for ourselves and our own health first because, without this, we cannot do the work that we are called to do (personal communication, October 10, 2008). After a gathering at Lakehead University, I wrote in my journal what I could remember from Jode Kechego's words. I wrote: "We have to remember that we can only do today what we can do today. We can only do what we can do. We have to do what we can do and let others do what they can do. We have to let the other things take care of themselves" (journal entry, February 15, 2008).

The voice of the salmon in the fall

We brought The People together to teach them about relationships and the necessity of mending and strengthening their connections within the Web of Life. We gathered the People around, compelling them to share their talk. It was the Elders and the Youth who could first see the work of Mi'kmwesu attaching and weaving the threads. Some People reached out to take those threads as Mi'kmwesu passed by, eager to reconnect

and repair their relationships. And there were those who brushed the threads of interconnectivity from themselves, believing that their truth was “the” truth. Mi’kmwesu was not discouraged. She wove the threads all around the People, cocooning both those who reached out and those who were reluctant, because the threads of interconnectivity are the fabric of life. It is within this fabric of relationships and experiences that People’s knowledge is nurtured and their spirits grow strong. Msit Nokmaq.

Searching for a thesis

By the end of the fall I was reflecting on the research project, looking at the research data, and contemplating the main threads. This was my initial attempt at analyzing the data. I reread my journal notes, talked to Todd, Tina, shalan, and Jamie, and read the work of many Indigenous scholars. I wondered how I could meaningfully analyze and present a narrative so that it was respectful of traditional cultural factors and had the strength to influence change in policy and pedagogical practice (Benham, 2007, p. 525-526).

Silence⁶⁰

⁶⁰ I have no idea what I am supposed to do, I think to myself.

Crow's fifth story

“I’ll tell you a story. Maybe that will help you think,” I hear Crow whisper. “Weasel sits quietly in the back of the classroom. He’s watching as That Teacher struggles to teach in the Big Mess in the tale of education. ‘Hey, no wonder there is such a Big Mess’, Weasel observes. ‘Those children are learning only one way of understanding the world. That tale of education is out of balance.’ Time slowly makes its way through that Big Mess, working along with Mi’kmwesu to repair and strengthen the threads of interrelationship, creating new tales as they weave the threads. Teachers who respect all Life and live their responsibilities within the Circle of Life watch as Time and Mi’kmwesu connect the threads of interrelationship to the Plant People. The Plant People take the threads right down into their roots and the threads become part of their spirits. The Teachers join the Ceremony and they, too, take those threads right down into their spirits and out into their teaching. And as they do, the Teachers celebrate their commitment to reciprocity, which brings balance to all Life.”

“Crow! I don’t know how to analyze the data and you are not helping!” I complain.

“You told me that you are using storytelling methodology,” Crow reminds me. “Remember that you read Kovach (2009) who wrote ‘story as method elevates the research from an extractive exercise serving the fragmentation of knowledge to a holistic endeavour that situates research firmly within the nest of relationship (p. 99)?”

Murdena's teachings

I turned my mind to the idea of relationship in hopes that there would be answers there. shalan suggested that I talk to Murdena Marshall, a Mi'kmaw Elder, Spiritual Leader, former school administrator, and retired Associate Professor.

“You have to talk to her,” shalan told me. “She talks about relationships and her teachings may help you.”

I visited Murdena and her husband, Albert Marshall, at their home in Eskasoni First Nation. Their teachings are grounded in Mi'kmaw knowledge. Murdena described the relationship that people have with that which they are coming to know. The concept was symbolized with four concentric circles. These circles represent the physical, personal, respect, and spiritual aspects of relations. The outer circle represents the physical knowledge of something or someone. It is through this that we recognize the other. The second circle represents the personal. It is through the physical and respect that we can then develop a personal relationship with that which we are attempting to know. The third circle represents respect. We have to respect something before we can have a relationship with it. The center circle of this relationship model represents the spiritual. It is in this stage of relationship that we come to understand the interconnectivity of our lives with the other and with all of creation. (personal communication, October 23, 2009).

After talking to Murdena, I returned to my writing, very excited that I had some new knowledge with which to reflect on and write about the research; a framework with which I could further explore and perhaps develop a way of analyzing the data.

Meditating on the data

I continue to think about the model that Murdena explained to me; the physical, the personal, the respect, and the spiritual that are all a part of human relationship to knowledge. I examine the sketches she made and the words she wrote in my notebook as we talked. This new knowledge is percolating right down through my thinking system, running along those well worn habits. I know how to figure this out. I know how to make those theoretical arguments in my europhilosophically trained mind (Cole, 2002, p 459). I outline my argument by creating a chart. It represents those four concentric circles that Murdena drew. In the columns, I write the words that relate those parts of relationship to four areas pertinent in the research: relationships with other people; relationships with salmon; relationships with other entities; and the progressive, on-going process of focusing on and validating Mi'kmaw knowledge in school learning. I remove those layers that hold life together, chop those concepts into bite size pieces, package them as intellectual commodities, and store them in tidy, square boxes that are logical, linear, and precise. Now I am getting somewhere in my thinking! I have order in my mind! I have knowledge!

I hear Crow laughing. "What are you laughing about Crow?" I ask.

"Ha! Ha! You just turned that circle story inside out. That's what happens when you try to make a circle into a box."

"But... but... I was just organizing my thinking," I defend myself. I turn my back to him and let my thoughts wander. No, I cannot possibly be assimilating Murdena's teachings into a Eurocentric thinking pattern. It is simply a reflection of how I am

organizing my thinking so I can analyze the data. It is a picture of the way I understand it ... and then I stop myself because I realize what I have just said. I said that the chart is how I understand Murdena's teachings. I said that I understand them in a linear, logical, isolated way. I said that I do not understand circles. Really, they just have you going around and around and around, chasing the tale of education. I think back to my question of how we center and legitimate Mi'kmaw knowledge in education. If I cannot think and understand the world from a Mi'kmaw perspective, then how can I possibly work at centering and legitimating the knowledge consistent with such teachings of the world? What exactly am I focusing on and validating?

Silence⁶¹

⁶¹ Henderson (1993) explains that “You don’t have to feel compelled to fill in the silence” (para. 1).

I feel “like the little boy who, long ago, went out on a spiritual search. He wandered to the Four Sacred Directions before he found himself back where he started” (Rheault, 1999, p 21).

“Back?” taunts Crow. “Did you go somewhere?” He is right in front of me. I turn my back to him again and again, turning around and around so he will not be able to hurl those know-it-all comments in my face.

“Don’t you want to learn about working together to develop Mi’kmaw education?” he chides as he flies over my head. I turn faster. I keep turning faster and faster until I begin to spin in circles.

“You learn by observing. What did you observe?” I hear him ask. I think of watching people in the community gather in learning circles and of seeing people in the school gather by “sitting in square box classrooms at these square desks and square tables.”⁶²

My silence did not quiet him because he knows that breaking silence “is basic to the decolonization of our mind” (Waziyatawin, 2005, p. 193). He pushes me with more questions.

“What did you hear?”

“I heard people talking; talking and sharing their truths. I heard the salmon tell how Mi’kmwesu was repairing the threads of our relationships; reconnecting us to all life in the Sacred Circle.”

“And what do you remember?”

What is this, my oral defence, I think to myself. “I remember reading Graveline’s words. She wrote that community is ‘a sacred concept’ and that rebuilding the ‘Self-in-

⁶² Smith, as cited in Indigenous Health Research Development Program, n.d., p. 48

Relation' is a connection between the individual and the community; rebuilding is 'an act of resistance' (Graveline, 1998, p. 164). I remember the participants in the learning circles talking about their bloodlines and how the Mi'kmaw community grew as many people (re)membered their relations. Maybe my resistance to the patterns in which my mind was trained can be found in the strength of my connection to all life."

"Maybe," Crow muses. "And maybe you are still trying to put knowledge in boxes, typing it up as the right answer to the question!" he suggests as he flies off.

My mind is spinning, chasing that tale of education "like a dog chasing its tail" (Ermine, 2000, p. 53). I chased Mi'kmaw knowledge in Wildcat First Nation with the salmon and the learning circles, then I chased it into the classroom when I was teaching Mi'kmaw Studies, and finally I chased it to Murdena's teachings. I was just about to grab that tale of education, grab it with my thoughts, sum it up in a brilliant analysis, but when I reached out to hold onto it that tale slipped through the gaps in my thinking. Somehow I had moved from circles to boxes. It is so difficult to hold onto those newly attached connections; those as yet thin threads that keep the lens of Mi'kmaw understandings in place.

Dizzy, I collapse. As I tumble, I crush those boxes and all of my words fall out. That space within the gaps in my thinking is dark. I try to pick my fragile understanding of Mi'kmaw world view up off the ground. I know nothing. I cannot tell this research story! I do not understand it! I have no words to share! I exercise my option to pass the talking stick along to someone else. I pass it to Cora Weber-Pillwax (as cited in Steinhauer, 2002):

I am always waiting for the thinking to stop, for that one glorious, culminating second when I know the whole answer to one question. I have been relearning that moment will not come, at least not while I am in thinking mode. (p.69)

What am I to do if I have lost my way of thinking? If I cannot think, then I cannot talk. I have no words. There is nothing to write. I turn off my computer. Confusion surrounds me. I do the only thing I know to do now- I take a walk on the land. There is a newly blazed trail, one as yet unworn, new like this way of knowing is new to my mind. The trail takes me around the lake and along the edge of the meadow that runs to the south. Confusion about Aboriginal education, my studies, and the work that I am involved in at the school swirls in my mind. I walk to a pile of erratics⁶³. I love these rocks. "I don't find them; they find me!" (Tinker, 2004, p. 107). Over many years they have found me again and again when I was struggling. Now they may soothe the collapse of my thinking structure. These rocks hold the stories of this land, the truths since time immemorial. I recall Runner (Four Arrows, 2008a) explaining that "It is not the talking to the rock so much as the listening that would be important for dissertations" (p. 12). I listen but I do not hear the rock saying anything to me. This is frustrating! I know from reading Tinker (2004) that in Indigenous ways of understanding the world rocks are held in high regard.

As the oldest and wisest of all life forms, then, rocks are to be deeply respected as a category but especially as persons. They are the source of all life on the planet, and they continue to generously give of themselves for maintaining all life. (Tinker, 2004, p. 109).

⁶³ Large boulders.

I do not understand this way of thinking. Maybe if I sit for a while, I will learn something. I attempt to crawl up on a rock. I scrape my hands and fall down; I am trying too hard to get to the highest point. Perhaps like the rock, I can be still in this place, be still in my thinking. I stand back and look at the rocks again. I choose another possible path; one that is not quite so steep... find a foothold... step...the other leg up... reach... ouch... more scrapes... hold on tight... pull... finally on the top. I sit. I watch the meadow grass, waiting..., waiting as we waited for the salmon eggs to hatch. Nothing visible is happening; no words of brilliant insight are being typed across my page.

I think of Henderson's (2000) description of how the earth and its forces are sources of knowledge, power, or medicine (Battiste, 1998). Henderson explains "nestumou," or the understood realms of the Mi'kmaq, which represent the earth and the teachings that come from it. There are eight realms, referred to as lodges, which are associated with certain forces that are interconnected and transform from one to another. For example, the living lodge is comprised of the underwater, earth, and ghost lodge and embody the spiraling forces affecting the daily life of the Mi'kmaq. Within the teachings of these lodges, "life and its forces are seen as a gift to be humbly accepted, not as something to be taken for granted or used to manipulate other life forms" (p. 258).

... that pine tree is huge... probably saw and heard much in its life time. I remind myself of Graveline's written words (1998): "That which the trees exhale, I inhale. That which I exhale, the tree inhales. We live in a world of many circles; these circles go out into the universe and constitute our identity, our kinship, our relations" (p. 56). The breaths of many generations of the ancestors have been absorbed into that tree and, in

turn, it sustained their breaths. That tree may be here into the time of my great, great grandchildren... I count on my fingers. I would have to say "great" five times to move from myself to the seventh generation hence.... it is hard to imagine that far ahead. Stop thinking in these linear constructions, I tell myself. Time is a circular reality. There is no beginning or end (Rheault, 1999, p 67).

...ripples on the surface of the water... ripples... I often hear about ripples as a metaphor for creating change. Throwing a rock in the water will create a ripple outwards; it will ripple out in concentric circles. The bigger the rock, the larger those ripples and the further they will travel. There has to be big changes in education. But there is no rock being dropped now, is there? That was the wind sweeping across the meadow water. I'll try to remember that there's more than one way to create a ripple; there has to be more than one way to make changes in education. I think of Crow challenging me. What would he say about ripples? Maybe he would say that ripples are on the surface rather than deep within the lake; that ripples are superficial.

...Crow flying by. I greet him for the second time today. "Good afternoon, Crow. I'm surprised you're not laughing at me for trying to come up with some profound..."

"Ha! Ha! Ha! You look as if you're sitting way up there waiting for a free floating thesis to come along and hit you over the head."

In hopes of convincing him that I am asleep, I close my eyes. Way, way back, a professor somewhere told me that if you look directly at a distant star you may not be able to see it, but if you look beside the star, you will see the light. The explanation was that the light rods are at the sides of the retina in a human eye and therefore we can see light more easily when we focus our eyes to the side of a small, lit object. It is now

interesting to realize how I have accepted that scientific explanation for all those years without ever questioning it. I'm not sure about the explanation but I am sure that I have experienced this phenomenon. Look at the space beside that distant star and then you will see the star. Hey, that's a good Crow trick. Maybe I should try that. Instead of analyzing the research for the answer to my question; maybe I could look at the open space⁶⁴ beside my "default thinking pattern" (Jennine Metallic, personal communication, January 2, 2010), the space that is not already filled but is open to new ways of knowing, new ways of understanding, and new ways of thinking about the world. Maybe that is the place where the research questions about centering and legitimating Mi'kmaw knowledge will be answered.

I hear my grandfather talking to me: "You are trying too hard to come up with an answer. Allow yourself to say 'I don't know'. It will free your mind." I explain to him that such a statement is not an acceptable way to conclude a dissertation. I need a strong argument that ends with some new piece of knowledge, a new insight into Aboriginal education; an answer to how we change what we teach, how we teach it, and what we consider valid knowledge. I have been trying to answer this question by using the thinking part of me, the part that I have nurtured through many years of formal education. And now that formally educated mind is detrimental to my learning. I realize that my mind has limits, limits in how it guides my understanding of the world- an understanding based on the way I have been educated, how I have been taught to think about the world and to think about knowledge of the world. My mind is racing, wondering how I can possibly stop thinking the way I do. Ermine (2000) gives me a hint

⁶⁴ Washashkong differentiates between open space and empty space in our minds. "To see beauty is to seek the truth with an open/not empty mind." (as cited in Rheault, 1999, p 25).

when he writes, “the mind, or reason, is constantly trying to understand in a reactive way what the heart knows only too well” (p. 53). What is it that my heart could possibly know that my mind does not? I turn to Rheault (1999):

The ability to recognize the answer is already part of a person’s spirit; it is merely a process of learning to ask the right questions to unleash the potential of truth. However, learning to ask the right questions is directed by years of learning to balance emotions, listening and watching, reflection and finally, doing. (p. 74)

Am I not ready for the answers of how to develop Aboriginal education? Have I not balanced myself? Have I not listened and reflected enough? Is there more work for me to do? Then it occurs to me that I am chasing the tale of education as if knowledge is something that is gained, a feature of a dominant paradigm of the world view (Wilson, 2001, p. 177). Nelson (2006) speaks to the responsibility of knowledge. “Acquiring knowledge always comes with personal responsibilities, but the dominant society does not often teach or emphasize this. Consequently, most Americans assume they have the right to learn anything they want” (p. 48). An unintentional “ouch” comes from deep down in my psyche as I realize that I, too, have assumed that I have the right to learn anything that I want to learn. My diplomas, certificates, and degrees demonstrate a lifetime of learning in that way. And yet, those pieces of paper are of no use to me now. They attest to my many years of formal education that designed the pathways of my default thinking pattern. Perhaps my words are lost because I do not yet know about my responsibility to what I have learned. It is not a question of what there is to learn but rather if I am ready to learn; ready to accept those responsibilities.

Metallic (2008) reminds me that the Mi'kmaw teachings and traditions are "not to be treated as 'sources of information' that can be accumulated for personal gain" but rather "teachings are often shared with the intent and understanding of strengthening our family systems, communities, and our nations" (p. 61). I sit on the rock and try to look past the goal of filling my head with new knowledge, trying to create a change in public school curricula that could be called "Mi'kmaw education," and working to get a dissertation written and approved. I contemplate going beyond the accumulation of knowledge, past it to exercise my personal responsibilities in the Circle of Life. "what about consideration for all our relations what about love for each leaf tree stone student colleague insect fish worm fourlegged microbe fungus moss lichen virus⁶⁵" Cole asks (2002, p. 457). What about learning from what my heart knows only too well? What about those teachings that come to me each day in my place in the world, the teachings from my relationships with the water and the trees, the teachers and the students, the community and my family? What about those teachings already given to me; the ones that I have gained in walks along the lake shore and sitting at the base of an old pine tree; the ones stored on a dusty shelf at the back of my mind, placed there because they did not fit my notion of knowledge? Will I have to (re)learn how to understand the lessons those teachings offered me? Have I not dismissed those teachings as not important; not worthy of academic discussion; not good enough; not relevant to formal education?

The wind sweeps across my face. I begin to wonder. I wonder what it is called when an entity is trying to teach me and I will not listen. I wonder if it is called arrogance or ignorance. Am I unable or unwilling to learn from all things? Perhaps

⁶⁵ Non-standard punctuation/English re-produced from original.

today the wind has something to teach me but if I seek knowledge as something to be gained, I doubt that I will understand. Can I learn without a goal of gaining knowledge that can be parceled in my head?

Listening... listening...I once listened to Sylvia Maracle (n.d.) tell the story of how she went seeking knowledge from her grandmother, only to be asked by her grandmother to move her wood pile. Each night Sylvia was too tired to listen to the women who were talking with her grandmother, sharing their stories, and so she did not learn from them either. After the wood pile was moved and she was ready to go, Sylvia explained how she was disappointed that she had not received teachings. Her grandmother responded that the sun and the birds and the water knew so much more than she knew herself and they were teaching Sylvia as she moved the wood. Sylvia said, "I felt so small." This story is a reaffirmation of the importance of the land in my life.

It is this land that protects me, a place where my heart and my mind can be united to share a common understanding of the teachings that have been given to me. It is here that I can learn to balance my emotions, where I can listen and watch, and where I can reflect (Rheault, 1999). It is here that my emotional balance is restored; my resiliency rejuvenated (journal entry, April 5, 2009).

It is on this land that I can come to honour my own "spiritual core" (Graveline, 1998, p. 130). In that honouring, I can do the work that I am motivated and passionate to do in education. I remind myself to write in my journal when I go home, phrasing the entry now in my head: "developing Mi'kmaw education cannot simply be a task to be accomplished through Western ways of understanding the world. Mi'kmaw knowledge is

a way of conceptualizing the world based in interconnectivity and respectful relationships with all else. I want to consider using respectful relationships to guide the work in the community and in the school.”

I look out over the meadow and see many dew covered spider webs strung on the meadow grass, glistening as the morning sun reflects off them. I consider that in my single-minded goal of getting up on this rock, I destroyed many of them. I check my pant legs and boots and then stare at the threads covering me. These threads are a tangible testament of my connection to this place. How many of them have I torn off in my haste to gain knowledge? How often have I missed the teaching because I mistook information for knowledge? How many times have I sacrificed relationships in pursuit of the goal, a goal of replacing curricula based in Western world views with curricula based in Mi'kmaw world views? What if I stopped understanding the work as a goal to be accomplished but rather as a way of living and working- building and strengthening respectful relations between the school staff and the Mi'kmaw community. What would happen if my work was focused on having respectful relationships with others while working to move a Mi'kmaw education agenda forward, with the emphasis on relationships rather than curricula?

“Hey, I see that you are finally asking some questions that might help you,”
comments Crow.

I ignore him and continue to think. “what about offering tobacco water thanks awareness prayer intoned sung danced or silently felt prayer as conversation with all of creation”⁶⁶ (Cole, 2002, p 457). I reach down, down past my head, way down into my heart to find my offerings. To the east I offer my gratefulness for each and every

⁶⁶ Non-standard punctuation/English reproduced from original.

teaching I receive. To the south I offer my acknowledgement that the sun, the water, the plants, and the animals are my sustenance. To the west I offer my appreciation for the wisdom and guidance given to me by my grandparents, my parents, and my teachers. To the north I offer my humility as I recognize the enormous teachings that come from the simplest of experiences. May I continue to learn. Msit Nokmaq.

Crow wisdom

“Wow! I have learned so much,” I tell Crow. “All I have to do now is wrap up the ending of this story.”

“Ending? This isn’t going to be another one of those happily-ever-after things is it?” he asks.

“No. This is where I put forth a thesis and come to a conclusion based on that thesis⁶⁷. I think of it as the part where I refer back to the central theme of the research and then bring all the stories together; tie up the loose ends⁶⁸,” I explain.

“Why would you want to bring all the stories together?⁶⁹” Crow asks.

“I’m supposed to. That’s the academic rules.”

“You went to university to learn rules about tying stories together?” chided Crow in a voice that sounded suspiciously like my grandfather. “I went to Bird College. They teach something different there.”

I take the bait. “What do they teach?”

“Life happens in a circle. We keep learning. There is no end,” says Crow. “You’ve told the stories of the Learning Circle and the Inside Out Circle. There is an Outer Circle and Circles outside of the Outer Circle and Circles outside of those Circles. The cosmos is infinite. The circles are like the layers of a sphere⁷⁰, connected through relationship. That which is in the Circle of Infinity is also in the Circle within You⁷¹. When you strengthen those connections and honour others in the Circle, you accept your responsibility for keeping the Circle strong. When you (ac)knowledge all

⁶⁷ Deer (as cited in Indigenous Health Research Development Program, n.d., p. 36)

⁶⁸ Sarrmis (as cited in Archibald, 2008, p. 152)

⁶⁹ McKay (as cited in Archibald, 2008, p. 152)

⁷⁰ Jennine Metallic, personal communication, January 2, 2010.

⁷¹ Graveline (1998) states “All of nature is in us, all of us is in nature” (p. 56).

life in the Sacred Web, you are in relationship. That's where knowledge is, in those relationships, and it is that knowledge that nourishes the human potential of all people⁷²."

⁷² Ermine (2000) writes: "As well, it is the intent to identify the points of agreement at the confluence of cultures where understandings can be worked on in the pursuit of emancipation and the social realization of the human potentiality" (p. 30).

Silence⁷³

⁷³ "Holding silence in this instance is the appropriate response" (Blaeser, 1996, p. 22).

CHAPTER FIVE

A TALE: THE OUTER CIRCLE

A pilgrimage

I am on my annual winter pilgrimage, circumnavigating the lake on this sunny late winter day. Chkupan, my twelve year old daughter is with me. The snow along the lake shore is deep so she walks behind me, stepping into my footprints. I laugh and begin to dance, challenging her to follow.

Our dance steps mark the unblemished snow and weave the story of our visits to all our relations along the way: the oldest of the pine trees, the large granite rocks protruding through the ice surface, and the beavers still wintering in their lodge. We clear a patch of snow and gaze through the ice to the world below. Each of us offers tobacco to reaffirm our relation to those who live in the waters of the lake.

“Mum, do you remember the day we released the salmon?” Chkupan asks.

“Yes, I do,” I reply. “Sometimes Todd, Tina, shalan, Jamie, and I talk about the salmon project, telling and retelling the story of the salmon. The stories about the salmon project become stronger as we retold, listened to one another telling, and reflected on our experience with the salmon. The experience grows and becomes more powerful because we relive the experience through story. Archibald (1997) refers to this when she writes: ‘the power of a story is shown in stories about a story’ (p. 94).

Every year that we watch the salmon eggs hatch, we accept our responsibilities to the salmon and to one another. We acknowledge our interconnectedness to the salmon when we perform the ceremonies as the salmon are released into the river to fulfill their life journey. The salmon teach us and we honour them by putting them at the core of our living story.

I think about the salmon project as we make our way back to the house. I remember talking with Albert Marshall about the salmon project (personal communication, October 23, 2009). He told me that when we learn from, it is through observation and personal relationship with the other that the learning takes place. This is different than the “surface learning” that happens when we learn about something. When we learn from something, it is a deep learning that reflects our respectful relationship with that other life. Cajete(1994) writes that “concepts of sharing, connecting and relating one’s life to animals formed the basic premise of Indigenous education” (p. 101).

I awoke one morning after a sound sleep and immediately realized that although we had often spoke of learning about the salmon, in fact we had learned from the salmon. We had become part of their lives as they had become part of ours. If we recognize the salmon as relatives in creation and if we have a relationship with them, then we can recognize them as our teacher (Rheault, 1999).

When I awoke the next morning, I went to my writing place and copied down the following story that was given to me in a dream⁷⁴ (journal entry April 29, 2008).

The Salmon’s story for the people

We are the Salmon People of the east coast of Turtle Island. We are born in the rivers where the fresh water runs off the land into the ocean. Our eggs are guarded by the Rock People who have been here since time immemorial. Their knowledge is far greater than all others. They protect us and share their wisdom with us. Long ago, when The

⁷⁴ Ireland (2009) recounts how an Elder explained that Ireland did not have to reclaim her culture but rather, “‘It’s all there, everything you need to know is right there - you just need to ask the questions and the answers will come.’ She taught me how to pose questions before sleep, reminding me: “Don’t forget to ask to remember the answer when you wake up.” (p. 5)

People knew their relation to us and remembered their ceremonies, we would give ourselves to them so they could live and grow. The People knew the ceremonies that celebrate the beginning of each season. They would drum and sing and pray. They called on the Spirits of their Ancestors to assist them and they called on the River Spirit to feed the Young so they would grow strong and healthy. In their prayers, The People remembered the Spirit of the Black Bear who fed on us and helped to spread the bones of our Elders along the shores of the River where they, in turn, became part of Mother Earth and nurtured all Creatures of the River. The People gathered and they told stories and all the Creatures of the Land would gather in the outer circle to listen. And in the singing and praying and telling, we were all part of the story. All Life was in balance and all Life flourished. We lived in this balance of relations and reciprocity for many, many lifetimes. More than anyone can remember.

And then the New Comers settled on the land. The People were corralled onto tiny parcels of land. The New Comers made rules so The People could not talk to one another in their own language. Then The People no longer remembered how to talk to us or to the other Finned, Winged, and Four-Legged Creatures. The New Comers' rules were obstacles and even the Rivers themselves were blocked with Rock People and Tree People. The New Comers called these river blocks "dams." The dams kept us from returning to the rock nests where we laid our eggs. The Spirit of the River was held back and made to flood the land where the Rivers-Edge Creatures lived. The Creatures screamed but no one heard. We called from the Ocean, telling The People that we wanted to come home to have our Young, but no one heard. No one heard because they could no longer speak the language of the Land.

There are few of us left now. Some of us have learned to jump the dams but it is a treacherous journey and no one is there to help us. Sometimes we are captured in nets and taken to live in the Hatchery. We are made to lay our eggs there, with no Rock People to guard and protect our Young or to share their wisdom. Sometimes we are lost during the journey. We pray to the River Spirit to help us find our families in the Ocean and when we get there, our families do not recognize us, nor us them. Only a few of our Elders still remember our ways and many of our Young have not learned their place in the Circle.

One day our Elders gathered and those of our Young who could still hear the voice of Mother Earth gathered in the circle, too. We asked the Creator to give our eggs to The People along the Wildcat River. The eggs were taken to the home of The People and kept safe. They asked the Rock People to be in the tank with us, and to make nests for us and to protect our Young. And while our eggs hatched and our Young came into the world, The People remembered. They remembered a few words to talk to us in the old ways and they remembered the drums songs in order to sing to us. Our Young heard the heart beat of Mother Earth and they knew it was safe to come into the world, the world that was changing. And when they hatched, The People carried them to the river and there they sang and prayed to the Spirit of the River to guide Our Young and they prayed to the Rock People to protect the Young. They put the Young into the water along the bank where the Little Ones could hide until they were ready. Some of The People had relearned the language of the land so they could hear the voices of the Ancestors who spoke that day. The Ancestors told The People to ready themselves, to learn their

language, to sing and drum, to do the ceremonies that reaffirm life, and to be in good relations with all People of the Land.

Then the Rock Ancestors spoke and shared their wisdom. They told The People to remember who they are and their connection to all things because life hangs in a balance and The People must give of themselves and take only what they need. And then the Great Spirit spoke to The People and reminded them to gather all their relatives, both those who have forgotten their bloodlines and those who have forgotten the ways of their People, and to then join with all People of the Land for we are all connected through Creation. The Great Spirit told The People to respect the gifts of others as all share their gifts in the Learning Circle that is Life. And when we respect and share, the circle that is the Web of Life will grow, too, and we will all be strong. Msit Nokmaq.

Differing world views

In my time alone through the winter, I continued to think about the research. I was struggling but I did not know why. There were no words. I evaded Crow as I knew he would pester me. My avoidance tactics were futile. He found me deep in thought one quiet afternoon. He was hanging upside down from a tree limb.

“You look confused,” Crow observes.

“You look like a bat,” I respond.

“I’m inverting my view of the world (Ermine, 200, p. 80),” he explains. “If you always look at the world the same way, you might begin to think that your way of understanding is “the” way. It is helpful to change your perspective once in awhile.”

“It’s going to take more than hanging upside down from a tree branch to clarify my thinking,” I state. “Eurocentric world view dominates every aspect of education. It seems as if the changes we are working towards in the school are obliterated by that domination. Sometimes ... well... sometimes I struggle to remain respectful towards Western world views. I have a ‘note to self’ inside my thinking space. On it are Hampton’s (1995) words: ‘We live in a world of many cultures, all of which have different standards. It is not necessary to devalue the standards of Western society, except insofar as they claim to be the only worthwhile standards’ (p. 37). This work in education is very difficult. The incongruities between western institutional structures and practices and Indigenous cultural forms are difficult to reconcile (Kawagley and Barnhardt, n.d, para. 23). I don’t know how to do this work in a respectful way; a way in which all are honoured in the Circle of Life (Graveline, p. 132).”

“You are focusing on the negatives- the things that are difficult and that are challenging. Reflect on what you do know. Find a perspective that will allow you to move ahead,” Crow advises.

Bringing together Indigenous and Western world views

“Strategies to bring together Indigenous and Western paradigms and practices” are, according to Mussell (2008, p. 333), reflected in the indigenization of an educational program. In the days following Crow’s visit, I searched to find the strategies of other educators. Michell (2005) writes that there is a balance between the two world views, a balance that is disrupted when “Euro-Western knowledge [is considered] superior to Indigenous ways of knowing” (p. 36). Ermine (2000) suggests that we have to work on “the cutting edge of knowledge production that enshrines the potential of all peoples and

worldviews” (p. 12). This cutting edge can be conceptualized as an “intersection” (p. 8), a “confluence” (p. iv), or a “convergence” (p. 122) of Indigenous and Western knowledge systems.

Kawagley and Barnhardt (n.d.) and Barnhardt and Kawagley (2005) seek “the common ground across world views” (2005, diagram 1). They represent these two knowledge systems with two over-lapping circles. Each knowledge system has unique views and the commonalities are represented in the over-lapping area. Kawagley (2006) writes of “the collision of contrasting worldviews” (p. 2) and of “searching for a synthesis between the two ways of understanding the world” (p. 134). Monture-Angus (1995) describes it as “the middle, the place between two cultures, where any bridges of understanding will be constructed” (p. 47). McGregor (2005) refers to a “co-existence” model of collaboration between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people whereby they develop independently but support one another in resolving common issues (p. 67). Kovach (2009) explains that there is a lack of discussion as to how education can support what she refers to as a “co-epistemological foundation” (p. 58).

I continued to think about this space: the intersection, the confluence, and the common ground and how it works in education. What is the space in education in which Western world views and Indigenous world views can co-exist? How is education based on a co-epistemological foundation? As Battiste (2002) writes: “the immediate challenge is how to balance colonial legitimacy, authority, and disciplinary capacity with Indigenous knowledge and pedagogies” (p. 7). “The question then,” as Gross (2005) explains, “becomes one of where the balance lies between uniting the experience

of Indians and non- Indians and acknowledging the differences between the two groups” (p. 122).

I recall reading a story that Guthrie Valaskakis (1993) says she borrowed and shortened from somewhere else. In this story there is a wolf who is blind as a result of an accident. The wolf asks and receives an eye from a mouse. With this the wolf can see only one tiny bit of the world- one tree, one person, one footprint. Then a buffalo agrees to give the wolf another eye, which enables him to see the full range of the world. “And so the wolf continues on his journey, now able to see with both his mouse eye and his buffalo eye” (p. 287). Guthrie Valaskakis describes these two eyes as enabling the wolf to see “the simultaneity of past and present, individual and collective, Indian and non-Indian (p. 287).” What if education gave students two such eyes, one to understand the world from a Western world view and another eye to understand the world from an Indigenous world view?

What if, as Michell (2005) suggests, “all people and their knowledge ways occupy an equal place within the sacred circle of life” (p. 42)? Mi’kmaw Elder Albert Marshall developed such a model of education. ‘Two-Eyed Seeing’ is based on seeing the strength in both Western and Indigenous knowledge systems and making a conscious effort to “respect the differences between the two perspectives and to focus on, and work from, a position of shared strengths” (Marshall, Marshall, and Iwama, 2010, p. 177). Albert helped me to further understand the thinking behind Two-Eyed Seeing by saying:

Our journey here is not meant for one perspective or one consciousness to get us through. We all need each other. So the lessons that we are trying to put forth

now to our young people- it's going to be much more expedient if we can take these tools of whatever the White man has brought forth and the tools that our forefathers left us with. (A. Marshall, in Institute for Integrative Science and Health, 2006)

I continued to think about this concept that speaks to “drawing upon the deep understandings” that these two knowledge systems represent and mindfully bringing their strengths together (Bartlett, in Institute for Integrative Science and Health, 2006) so that we might have “meaningful dialogue” (Ermine, 2000, p. 122). These are respectful, balanced approaches to education that are based in the spirit of sharing the strengths of these two world views; a place of balance. It reminds me of the work of Mi'kmwesu in repairing and strengthening the relationships between people. It is this understanding, based in Mi'kmaw world view, which will guide us in bringing Mi'kmaw knowledge into the classroom.

Ermine explains that “Working towards the respect and understanding of different and multiple readings of the world captured in alternate worldviews can enhance the human capacity to create knowledge” (p. 122-123). Within this work, he describes an “ethical space” between Indigenous and Western knowledge systems where “the virtues of respect and compassion for the human spirit will guide the process of understanding across cultures” (p. 112). These are respectful, balanced views of knowledge that are based in the spirit of sharing the strengths of these two world views; a place of balance and “good and right relations” (Hodgson –Smith, 1997) between all people involved in the work of education.

I thought about respecting both Aboriginal and Western world views, and how such respect contributes to the spirit of collaboration. London, St. George and Wulff (2009) explain that respecting the views of all contributors as worthy and important, and valuing all contributions are the fundamental keys of collaboration (p. 2).

I thought back to the learning circles held during the salmon project. Those circles were sharing circles, an opportunity to offer our truths and knowledge through stories. I thought of how we valued one another as we shared our stories.

The Aboriginal value of sharing manifests itself in relationships. Relationships result from interactions with the group and with all creation. Sharing speaks not just to interchanging material goods but also, more importantly, to the strength to create and sustain “good feelings.” Maintaining good feelings is one reason why a sense of humour pervades Aboriginal societies. Sharing also brings about harmony, which sustains strength and balance (Little Bear, 2000, p.79).

Trickster consciousness

“These concepts of bringing Indigenous world view and Eurocentric world view together are helpful in understanding how this works,” I muse aloud.

“Yes, but you’re still writing from your head about how to focus on Mi’kmaw knowledge in formal education as if it is a specific goal that, when achieved, entitles you to say: ‘We did it!’ You are still using linear thinking,” he concludes. “You are still trying to find the right answer, still trying to package knowledge, still staring directly at

the light. 'The truth is not out there to find. It is in our hearts' (Monture-Angus, 1995, p. 51). Speak from your heart."

And with that, he flies away... backwards! "See you in the outer circle," he calls.

Crows can't fly backwards, I remind myself. Another trick! "You're just a trickster!" I yell after him. "This is a trickster place!" Confused and not knowing what else to say, I pass the talking stick to Vizenor.

"Crow is pushing you into trickster consciousness," he tells me. "I go for that, too (as cited in Blaeser, 1996, pg.162)," he confides. "Trickster consciousness is the inbetween place. It is found when you juxtaposition two or more incompatible frames of reference (Babcock, as cited in Blaeser, 1996, p. 152). Trickster consciousness disrupts the opposites (Vizenor, as cited in Blaeser, 1996, p. 162) and it liberates you from conventional thinking" (p. 148).

*The talking stick then moves on to Garrett (1996) who explains *The Rule of Opposites*, a rule that addresses dualities and wholeness in life.*

The balance of which Native American tradition speaks is not a recognition of two separate phenomena, and a decision as to which is best and which is worst. The balance of which American Indian tradition speaks is a recognition of the oneness of two differing phenomena, and a decision to honor both through harmony and balance. (p. 25)

Garrett and Garrett (1996) further explain that it is in this recognition of oneness that "universal learning takes place" (p. 215).

The talking stick then comes to me. I hold it until the words are ready to emerge from my heart and the spirits move me to speak.

Silence⁷⁵

⁷⁵ I think of Walter's words: "When silence eventually moves us to speak, we know the power of silence and our own words. Remember both, we are told" (1992, p. 105). In this moment of silence, I connected my inner story and my outer story, my heart and my mind, the personal and the communal, and my silence and my voice.

I said, “I realize that when I focus directly on bringing Mi'kmaw knowledge into the school, I am thinking and using my default pattern of linear logic. In this mode I want to find the ‘right way’ to work and I often get frustrated. When I step backwards into the outer circle with Crow, I see the Circle of Life as a story. It is in the outer circle that dichotomies become one and life is in balance.”

“I am learning that the place where Mi'kmaw world view and Western world view come together is a place where trickster tales exist. I remember reading Little Bear's (2000) ideas about these world views coming together. He said, ‘no one has a pure worldview that is 100 percent Indigenous or Eurocentric rather everyone has an integrated mind, a fluxing and ambidextrous consciousness, a precolonized consciousness that flows into a colonized consciousness and back again (p. 85)’. ”

CHAPTER SIX

A NEW TALE

Explaining my insights to Crow

I tiptoe out the back door of the house and find my way, in the dark, to the tree where Crow is sleeping. The first rays of light have not yet broken over the horizon. I stand with my back to the east, turn on my flashlight, and shine it directly at Crow.

“Wow, it’s a bright, sunny morning. Time to wake up the world,” Crow mutters to himself. He stretches his wings, opens his beak, and calls “Caw! Caw! Good morning!” He is fluffing his feathers when I turn off the flashlight. “Hey! Hey! What’s going on?... Oh my gosh! I’m blind! Help me! I’m blind!”

I cannot hold my laughter in any longer. “Ha! Ha! Ha! Oh Crow, you’re not blind. Remember- don’t look at the light. Look at the open space beside the light. That’s the place of trickster consciousness. When you look directly at the light, you are thinking in a linear way.”

“Humph,” he grumps. “Can’t you just let an old Crow sleep?” He closes his eyes.

“Crow! Wake up! I came out to tell you that I heard a voice.”

“Good to know your ears are working,” he responds sarcastically.

“No, no. You don’t understand. I heard just one voice.”

“I hear one, too. Why don’t you put it back to bed?”

“Cranky! Cranky! You have pushed me and challenged me and mocked me through this entire story. I finally got something figured out and you don’t even want to listen,” I challenge.

“Fine! What is it that you figured out?”

“I had a dream⁷⁶. In it, all the people were sitting in a circle and they were talking. It was just like we did in the learning circles. There were community members and school staff. They were talking; talking about the work we are doing together. They were telling a story and there was only one voice,” I explain.

“There was only one person talking? No sharing?” he asks.

“No. No. They were all speaking as one voice. They were sharing their stories and ideas of the salmon project. They were listening respectfully. Their words were strong. They talked together until there was only one story⁷⁷. Don’t you get it, Crow? In the retelling and the listening to the story of our experiences, we brought that story back to life (Vizenor, as cited in Blaeser, 1996, p 164). In the talking and listening and retelling, we created a new story that came from the old story. The people in the community and the people in the school used to tell different stories. The salmon project was a collaboratively constructed story (Bishop, 1998, p. 206). Collaborative stories, created through respect and reciprocity, bring about balance and harmony and create healing that restores relationships. Do you remember when I read the end of King’s (2003) book, ‘The Truth About Stories’, to you? He quoted Nigerian storyteller Ben Okri as saying: ‘If we change the stories we live by, quite possibly we change our lives’ (p. 153). Do you get it? We are creating a new story and we are changing the way we live and work together. ‘The joint development of new story-lines is a collaborative effort’ (Bishop, 1998, p.207). Our new story began to emerge when we could reflect on,

⁷⁶ Hodgson- Smith (1997) describes the impact of dreams: “Some dreams are significant because upon waking we are different, we see things differently because of the dream” (p. 56).

⁷⁷ In reference to the way in which the Mi’kmaq traditionally discussed issues and made decisions, Elder Stephen Augustine writes “Those individuals sitting down together and saying we are going to make our words strong. They start talking individually until, as my great grandfather told me, they could only hear one voice.” (Atlantic Policy Congress of First Nations Chiefs Secretariat and Indian and Northern Affairs Canada, 2006).

and make sense of, our experiences within the salmon project (Bishop, 2005, p. 126).

Now we can use the Mi'kmaw understanding of relationship and reciprocity to move our storying forward. We can collectively write a new story about education."

I continue. "In my dream, I could see the threads! It was those threads, those story threads, which were connecting everyone and everything. I could see Mi'kmwesu! I thought she was just an intellectual metaphor. But I saw her! I saw her take the story threads that came from each person's story line; each person's truth. Our respectful sharing of stories reaffirmed our interconnectedness with one another (Graveline, 1998, p.132). Mi'kmwesu wove those story threads together and mended the torn and frayed parts, just like my grandmother used to mend my grandfather's worn out socks."

"It is through restored relationships that we create new stories because the relationship threads interconnect and weave the fabric of our lives and our stories. Remember when I would take wood ticks off me and tear them in two pieces. When I watched Todd with a wood tick, I was reminded that they, too, are part of my interconnectivity to all things. Even the smallest creatures are part of the Circle of Life and I have a personal responsibility to all things within the Circle. I have restored my relationship with wood ticks and I have created a new story. Now when I see one, I carry it outside and gently put it on the ground. It is a new story based on a restored and restored relationship."

"I used to think about centering and legitimating Mi'kmaw knowledge as something that could be taken up within a formal education understanding of what knowledge is and how we teach. I was trying to find the way to do the work. I was looking, as if it were a recipe that I could find. But there are no recipes, no rules, and no

step-by-step directions are there Crow? It is about doing what is ethical in our lives as we share this land. It is about working together to create learning for our children. My responsibility is to work towards nurturing and restoring 'good and right relations' (Hodgson –Smith, 1997) through respecting, sharing, listening, and speaking my own truth. The work is relationship work. The work of Mi'kmwesu can't be confined to the curriculum of square boxed classrooms can it, Crow?"

"The more I experienced Murdena's teachings about relationships, the more I understand them. Those circles representing the physical, personal, respect, and spiritual are parts of the layers of relationship. The physical aspects, the personal aspects, the respect, and the spiritual elements are the components that are in a relationship that is deep; a relationship through which we learn from the other. Wilson (2008) maintains that knowledge is relational and that we have a relationship with all of creation. He writes that 'the importance of relationship must continue to take precedence' (p. 118). 'The 'giving' of knowledge is due to the understanding that all of Creation is an interconnected reality' (Rheault, 1999, p. 75) and thus it is through our relationships that we have knowledge."

"Crow, I am getting a better understanding. Crow?... Crow?..."

Silence⁷⁸

⁷⁸ “In order to transgress the boundaries of silence I also had to transcend my own edges” (Kirkland, 2008, p. 1).

Understanding the trickster within

“Mum!” I hear Chkupan’s voice from inside the house. I realize that the sun is well over the horizon and I can see her clearly as she steps out the back door. “Mum! Who are you talking to?” she asks me.

“I’m talking to Crow,” I tell her. “I came out to tell him about my dream.”

She looks up in the tree. Crow is not there. “Crow?” she asks me. “He may not be able to hear you, wherever he is,” she offers.

We sit down together on the back step. She stares at the flashlight still in my hand. “Having trouble seeing in the daylight?” she asks with Crow-like sarcasm in her voice.

“Oh, that’s just a trickster story prop,” I reply.

“Mum, why do you keep saying Crow is a trickster? Our dog can do more tricks than a crow.”

“Trickster is a story character who makes the story more entertaining and he embodies the teachings of the story. We like to laugh at trickster but we also learn from him. He’s the one who makes mistakes and, if we are listening to the story and learning from it, we won’t make the same mistakes (Iseke-Barnes, 2009, p. 33). In this research story, Crow sometimes reversed the story roles. Instead of me being the researcher and the storyteller, I was the one making mistakes. As the research moved along, I realized that we may also have a trickster within ourselves. In my struggles to decolonize my mind, one of my greatest challenges came from inside me; from the contradiction of my internal and my external

worlds and from the gap between what my head knows and what my heart tells me.”

“I relate to what Neilsen (as cited in Cox, 2008) wrote,” I say to Chkupan.

Every great writer or researcher I have ever encountered- every inspiring thinker I’ve known- has spent time figuring themselves out in relation to the larger world order in order to know how to contribute... it’s the kind of work done in silence and solitude, work that bears fruit we can take to those around us: fruit such as humility, the willingness to let go of illusions, the lessons of listening, and of reaching out to others. (p. 106)

“There have been many silences and pauses for me during this research. These were occasions when I could reflect on an event or on something I read or heard. I could hear the trickster talking to me. It was at these times that I gained valuable insights by recognizing the contradictions within myself and my responsibility to others.”

“I’ve been trying to work with others to move an Aboriginal education agenda forward but it occurred to me during this research that ideas have their own spirit. I asked Todd about it. ‘Yes, ideas have a spirit, too, and grow in their own time’, he told me (personal communication, February 19, 2009). Things happen in their own time and when they happen, they give birth to new ideas. I have wondered if, instead of us coming up with the ideas to move an Aboriginal education agenda forward, perhaps ideas take us into their work. Maybe the story writes our lives, rather than us writing the story. This view has helped me disrupt

my own tendency to be task oriented, forging ahead with my personal notions of what is to be done without considering the need to respect, restore, and strengthen relationships as I go.”

“When I think of restoring and maintain good relationships, I think of the salmon project and the teaching of Mi’kmaw Studies. Those were opportunities for us to strengthen what Kovach (2009) refers to as ‘relational skills’: having humility, having a sense of humor, and being ‘attuned’ (p. 65). We nurtured the collaborative relationships just as we nurtured the salmon eggs, hatching and then releasing the ideas of a working group.”

“I repeat the research question to myself: How can we collaboratively work to center and legitimate Mi’kmaw knowledge in education? The answers are in the threads of interconnectivity which, when wove together, create the story of our lives” (journal entry January 15, 2009).

Crow’s sixth story

I continue to sit on the step after Chkupan returns to the house. I soon hear the familiar “Caw! Caw!” of Crow’s call. He joins me on the step.

“Time sends Idea along,” says Crow. “Idea goes to that University and learns to dialogue in that Teacher Talk. Idea talks to That Teacher and invites the class to a workshop at Weasel Ville. Idea gives That Teacher lesson plans for the workshop and a class set of handouts. ‘I’m not sure’, says That Teacher. She has to think about it. Idea talks about how the workshop will meet the curriculum outcomes in three areas for that grade level. That Teacher agrees to the trip.

Weasel is very excited. The class arrives at Weasel Ville. Idea gathers the children in a circle. 'We always start with a dance', says Idea. Weasel shows the students how to dance the Relationship Dance. That Teacher is not dancing but Idea is not discouraged because she knows Time is coming along. While they dance, all the students and all the weasels hold onto the threads that Mi'kmwesu gathered from the Rock People, the Four-Legged, the Swimmers, the Winged, the Waters, the Mountains, the Valleys, and the Winds. They dance around and around. After awhile Time comes along and That Teacher dances, too. They all dance until they are cocooned in the threads of relationship."

"That's a good Mi'kmwesu trick," I laugh. "That tale of education is bound to look different as people transform within those cocoons."

"How to bring Mi'kmaw knowledge into the school is an idea that will grow in its own time. There is much for you to do so Idea can move along," Crow advises.

CHAPTER SEVEN

TAKING TEACHINGS FROM THE TALE OF EDUCATION

Interpreting the teachings

The work highlighted in this story is continuing but the research story itself, which is written in these pages, must come to an end. As I contemplate closing it, I think of Neilsen's (Cox, 2008) remark that "we must know our own stories, and be bold about learning what they mean" (p. 105). I want to ask Crow what the story means but I know that the answer is already within me. My reflections wander along those new paths in my thinking and come to the place where there are memories of reading Meyer (Four Arrows, 2008 a). She emphasizes the importance of interpreting rather than explaining or analyzing research. I imagine Crow telling me that analyzing presupposes that things can be broken down into parts and that academic work traditionally engages in deciphering those parts. And then he might remind me that interpretation is a way for me to offer the teachings that I gathered from the experience. These offerings are the way in which I share the knowledge that was given to me. "I cannot tell you the 'right' answers to the research question," I tentatively write across my page. "I can only tell you what the story means to me and what I have learned. When I answer this way, I speak from both my head and my heart." Crow nods his head in a gesture of approval.

My interpretations come as I tell and retell the research story and as I listen to the co-researchers telling their stories of our work. This pattern of telling, listening, and retelling has been repeated many times and, with each reliving of the story, I learn more from it in what Clandinin and Connelly (2000) refer to as "a reflective relationship."

They write that as

difficult as it may be to tell a story, the more difficult but important task is in the retelling of stories that allows for growth and change. We imagine, therefore,

that in the construction of narratives of experience, there is a reflexive relationship between living a life story, telling a life story, retelling a life story, and reliving a life story. (p. 71)

In this final section of the story, I share my understandings of particular parts of the research that speak to the dynamics of school educators and Mi'kmaw community members working together to center and legitimate Mi'kmaw knowledge in education. I have put these teachings, about working together, into bundles that I have named: silence, tricksters, and storytelling as the research tool.

Silence

Contemplating this research story, I realize that silence is the spaces in the story fabric; the space between the warp threads and weft threads of relationship. Blaeser's (1996) suggests that we recognize that "silence too has inherent power" (p. 22). In the story, silence took form through: quieting of the self, an absence of voice, and the place of the sacred.

Quieting of the self

I experienced silence as the quietness that I had to bring within myself in order to listen to what someone else was saying. I had to silence myself by quieting my own self talk and suspending my thinking. Quieting my self talk was not easy and so listening, respectfully listening to others, took much effort and intention. In this silence I could listen to others and honour their words and stories. The silence created "good listening" (Archibald, 2008). In the pauses between speakers, I would reflect on what was said and then prepare myself to listen to the next speaker. The quietness within me

was a way of being respectful to others. When we collaborate, we are responsible for quieting ourselves and respectfully listening to others so that we hear their words and honour their truths. I think back to Charlie Labrador's teaching on speaking our truth. I realize that it is my place to offer what I know; not to push as if I have "the truth" but simply to speak my truth knowing that some will hear it, some will challenge it, some will resist it, and some will negate it. But I have spoken my truth and I am obliged to respectfully listen to the truths of others. I recall Neilsen's (as cited in Cox, 2008) description of her own learning through what she refers to as "lyric inquiry":

My stories and others' stories are all necessary so that we can help each other learn not who is right or who knows more, but what really matters. How to be wise, how to listen deeply, how to change ourselves so that we can change the world around us. (p. 110)

Listening deeply and learning what really matters requires that we bring this kind of quietness to our internal selves when school staff and community members work collaboratively.

An absence of voice

Silence may also be an absence of human voices. There were several variations of this lack of voice in the research story. One was what Dion (2009) refers to as a "respectful silence," when people are uncertain as to what to say. This silence was evident in the first sharing circles in Mi'kmaw Studies class when the talking stick traveled the circle and no one spoke. The students were uncomfortable and only an occasional nervous giggle broke the silence as the talking stick quickly passed from

hand to hand. With more experience in sharing circles, the students became more comfortable with the circles and they spoke more often.

Oppressive silence, in which some voices are silenced while others are privileged, was also a factor in our collaborative work. According to Battiste (2004), breaking oppressive silence is counteracted with guilt, anger, denial or racist justification for continued colonial privilege (pp. 8-9). Our efforts to teach Mi'kmaw history was one example of breaking oppressive silence. The school has traditionally offered only a Canadian history course, which is from a Eurocentric perspective. By teaching Mi'kmaw Studies, the suppressed Mi'kmaw stories and history were told and thus an oppressive silence was broken. It was important to the relationship between school staff and community members for teachers to make this effort to break oppressive silence.

An absence of voice was also evident in my own struggles with how to articulate my experiences teaching Mi'kmaw Studies. It was the “pressures and emotional forces” (Battiste, 2004, p. 8) of teaching the course that were difficult to put into words. The silence was my “survival strategy” (Graveline, 1998) and my resistance (Guno, 2001) to the pressures that I was experiencing. It was in telling the research story, an unconventional approach to a dissertation, that I found my voice and broke my silence. I concur with Gosse (2008) who explains, “I hadn't fully realized that by *breaking silences*, I also had to break with academic traditions, which can be rigid and, in my view, contrary to true academic curiosity and inquiry” (p. 67, italics in original).

To remain silent and not tell the story would be a passive response (Guno, 2001) to the struggles and challenges the working group experienced in the focus on Mi'kmaw

knowledge in the community school. If there is silence, the work can be passed off as unimportant and not relevant to current classroom practices. Telling the research story in a way that honours Mi'kmaw understandings of the world and breaks the silence is an important part of our collaboration.

The place of the sacred

In describing Momoday's writing, Blaeser (1996) writes that silence is "a sacred presence.... the very fibre of communication" between two entities (p. 21). It was in this silence that I learned, relearned, and remembered the interconnectivity of all things within the Circle of Life. This silence was a place to renew my relationship with other beings. It was a time of "deep listening and hearing with more than the ears" (Hart, 2010, p. 10). It was a time during which I could hear and learn from Mi'kmwesu, the Salmon People, and Crow. Silence communicates that which has not been or cannot be put into words and it considers that which is privileged and that which is denied (Wattchow, 2004, p.10).

Silence took me to a spiritual place. Hodgson-Smith (1997) describes this connection by writing: "in silence we sit and think and pray for strength and guidance" (p. 52). Todd reminded me to smudge each day as a way of dealing with the negativity that I was experiencing. Smudging both enabled me to let go of negativity and to reconnect to all life, which I did by remembering my connections and repairing or strengthening my relationship connections.

After quieting myself and listening in silence, I was able to communicate with those who do not speak in human voices: Mi'kmwesu, the Salmon People, and Crow. It is in this way that I learned to talk to the land and, as Frank had promised, it talked back

to me. It was through reverence that I knew its voice. The disruption of my thinking moved me from understanding knowledge from a Eurocentric perspective to learning and accepting that knowledge also comes from other living things, such as the Salmon People and Crow. Four Arrows, Jacobs, and Sage (2010) explain that paying attention to animals, “move[s] us away from [a] human only approach to understanding” (p. 12). After I recognized the narrow limits of my understanding, I could listen with humility (Wattchow, 2004, p. 11). And in opening myself to the truths of those other voices, I learned from their teachings.

When I acknowledged these teachings as valid, my sense of what knowledge is and how knowledge is acquired began to change. I recognized that I was learning in more ways than through my senses. I began to pay closer attention to my intuition and my dreams and I valued these as ways in which new knowledge came to me. This acceptance came in the sacred presence of silence; the place where the interconnectivity of all things is acknowledged. These new understandings impacted my participation in the collaborative process because I continued to broaden my understanding of what knowledge is and where it comes from. These experiences enabled me to more deeply respect and learn from all entities and to carry the responsibilities that come with the teachings I was given.

Tricksters

In reflective silence I can more fully appreciate the teachings of the trickster characters: Mi'mwesu, the Salmon People, and Crow. I reread the story, looking for what Vizenor (as cited in Blaeser, 1996) refers to as the “watch words of a trickster signature.” These words are: contradiction, balance, between, humor, imagination, comic, communal,

transformation, dream, mythic, imagination, and survival (p. 143-144). Vizenor explains that these words indicate trickster space and a disturbance to the routine way of doing or thinking; they signify surprise. The disruptions in the research came in the form of inside out lessons and interruptions that helped me to better understanding how to work collaboratively and how to make educational space for Mi'kmaw knowledge.

Mi'kmwesu's teachings

Through her actions, Mi'kmwesu reminded me that interconnecteness and interrelationships are the threads that weave the fabric of life and there is a real need to repair and strengthen those relationships. I began the research thinking about the curriculum we would develop and the way in which we would bring people into that work. Mi'kmwesu disturbed that linear thinking to show me that there was no separation of the work from the people or from other life forms, and that curriculum and relationships within the Circle of Life are inextricably connected.

In my experience, the challenges of our work in education were mitigated when Mi'kmwesu spun cocoons of respectful relationships around us. These cocoons were safe places where transformation, one of Vizenor's trickster watch words, was nurtured. One of the transformations that I experienced was the change from a focus on developing curriculum to honouring relationships. I became convinced that developing and keeping good relationships with all people was a foundation of the educational work we were undertaking and that without such relations, our efforts were pointless. This conviction extended to an awareness of my responsibility for keeping myself in good relation with all other entities, including the trees, the lake, and the smallest of creatures such as the wood tick. I had to live the teachings of interconnectivity in order to know

and, in turn teach, from a Mi'kmaw perspective. I was also obliged to keep myself emotionally and mentally balanced in order to participate in our collective work.

The teachings of the Salmon People

The Salmon People turned my preconceived ideas, about learning, inside out. The salmon eggs were chosen as a focus of the collaborative learning project between Wildcat First Nation and North Queens School because all people in the area could relate to salmon as they live in the local waterways. The fish were a common point of life on the land. For me there was an unspoken, perhaps even an unconscious, assumption that people would share knowledge and learn more about the fish. The research story initially follows this reasoning with a description of the salmon project, the observation of the development of the eggs, and the numerous aspects of the learning circles as we came together to learn more about salmon.

When the Salmon People arrived in the story they described people's actions and the state of human relationships. Rather than people watching the fish, it was the fish reflecting humanity back to us. The salmon were a voice that represented other beings in the Circle of Life, giving an "other-than-human" perspective on events. Abram (London, 2010) explains that "because we are limited by our human senses, our nervous system, and our two arms and our two legs," [animals are] "another set of senses, another angle from which [humans] can see and hear and sense what's going on in the surrounding ecology" (para. 29).

It was the voice of the Salmon People that reversed my understanding of learning about something to an understanding of learning from that entity. This experience of where learning comes from was confirmed by Albert Marshall as he

explained to me the difference between superficial learning and deep learning. He also explained that historically the salmon were both a food source and part of a ceremonial expression of gratitude as expressed by the Mi'kmaq (A. Marshall, 2007). This reminded me of the physical and the spiritual aspects of life and the reverence that I must have for all living things.

What I learned from the Salmon People extended far beyond my observations of the hatching salmon eggs. They reminded me to accept the gifts that all creatures bring to the Circle of Life, to not take more than I need, and to accept responsibility for all in the Circle. The Salmon People spoke of balance and, through their stories, they wove a connection between the past and the present, the human and the non-human, and the giving and taking of life. Through the stories they offered, they reminded us of our traditions, our Ancestors and Elders, our responsibility to the land and all that is on the land, the interconnectivity of all life, and the importance of our language and our prayers. I carry this knowledge from the Salmon People with me.

The Salmon disrupted my understanding of where knowledge comes from. They spoke through my dreams and, in so doing, they ensured that I received knowledge in ways other than reading and writing, pedagogy that is emphasized in Eurocentric, formal education. In accepting the knowledge that came to me through dreams, I legitimated this pedagogy within myself. By including the Salmon People in the research story, I honoured them and the knowledge they bring to humans. After this change in my understanding of where knowledge comes from, and once I accepted my dreams as a source of knowledge, it became easier for me open my thinking to legitimate other

sources of knowledge, including meditation and prayer, as well as the knowledge embodied by all things in existence.

Crow's teachings

Crow brought laughter to the story. Each time I shared various drafts of this research story with others, the listeners laughed at Crow. Laughter kept the atmosphere of our collaboration light hearted and entertaining. The joking and good-natured teasing within the working group contributed to “good feelings” (Little Bear, 2000) and “good and right relations” (Hodgson-Smith, 1997).

The dynamics between Crow and me illustrated the tension between formal education, as reflected in my scholarly pursuits, and the informal ways of learning that were the underpinnings of Crow's mockery. Our banter typified the longstanding disconnect between researchers and First Nations communities (Smith, 1999). Crow ridiculed my Eurocentric thinking and challenged the academic rules that were guiding my writing efforts. Crow poked fun at my attempts to polish the research story, to analyze it, and to insightfully develop a theory to explain our collaborative work. Crow embodied “the sacred clowning that deflates pomposity” (Mann, 2008, p. 42), ensuring that the researcher could, in no way, be considered “an expert.” After listening to this research story, Jamie exclaimed, “I love Crow! He's funny the way he gives you a hard time” (personal communication, January 15, 2009). It was humbling to be upstaged by a crow!

Crow's constant presence challenged my single-minded focus of centering and legitimating Mi'kmaw education within the school. He brought chaos to the story and to my thinking. Barnhardt and Kawagley (2004) and Kawagley, A. O. & Barnhardt, R.

(n.d.). reason that chaos opens systems to innovation and change. My experience is that chaos seeps into the cracks in education and pries open the space needed to bring Aboriginal knowledge into education. Chaos also disrupts our thinking and thus it is a tool to decolonize one's mind. I now realize that decolonizing my mind was marked by ambiguity and confusion. Crow became my reminder that there was a way through the confusion and contradiction. It was through Crow, the trickster, that I reframed my perspective in order to change my thinking.

Crow's weasel stories disrupted the flow of "my story" and usurped my role as the storyteller. The weasel stories illustrated the chasm between the understanding and values of teachers in weasel's school and his family in the community. References to "That Teacher" and "Those Parents" exemplified the stereotypes in weasel's world. Crow's weasel stories presented the challenges of our work without identifying particular human individuals, affirming that it is the issues, not the individuals, which are the focus of our collaborative work. By not blaming or criticizing individuals, but rather embodying the educational issues in a trickster story, Crow taught me a valuable lesson about maintaining good and respectful human relationships. The move from negativity towards others to focusing on concerns about education was the biggest change I noticed in the relationships between community members and school staff.

While rereading the research story and further reflecting on it, I realized something more about the dynamics between myself and Crow. As the storyteller and researcher, I assumed a responsibility for control of the research story to be told in the way that I thought it should be told based on my notions of what a dissertation is "supposed" to be, notwithstanding the fact that it was an alternative format. I was slow

to accept and value Crow's stories as legitimate teachings. They were different from mine and did not fit within my idea of what a dissertation is, in much the same way as Mi'kmaw teachings can be dismissed as not legitimate knowledge to be taught in public school. My reluctance to include Crow's stories helped me to understand the hesitation that classroom teachers may experience and their resistance to embracing Aboriginal knowledge in their curriculum.

Trickster, in all the forms, convinced me that knowledge can come through many means; challenged me to embrace opposites, contradictions and ambiguities as catalysts to think in new ways; and urged me to share laughter and good feelings in all my relationships.

Since experiencing the research and writing the research story, I now pause and reconsider when I perceive what Mann (2008) labels as "one-thinking" (p. 42), the single-minded, one-truth-only reasoning that is present when Eurocentric world view dominates life. She writes:

Euro-Americans cannot see two of anything without immediately assuming that one of them must be the deadly enemy of the other. Only one can be legitimate for them; the other is flawed, an impostor that must be rooted out. (p. 42)

Freeing my mind from conventional ways of thinking about education enabled me to consider new ways of bringing Mi'kmaw world view into an education system that is dominated by Eurocentric world view.

Storytelling as the research tool

Storytelling, as an alternate format of inquiry, opens alternate spaces for learning, disrupts form, and decolonizes writing (Sameshima, 2008, p. 53). Storying reflects Aboriginal world view and pedagogy (Little Bear, 2000; Lanigan, 1998; Cajete, 1994; Battiste, 2002; Stiffarm, 1998; Bishop, 1996; Kovach, 2009) and thus it gives legitimacy to Mi'kmaw knowledge and honours Mi'kmaw ways of knowing. Using this methodology indicates my efforts to "learn and honour the ways of my people in the manner they were meant to be learned" (Schneider, 2008, p. 34) and benefitted the Mi'kmaw community, our children, and our grandchildren. Leclair (as cited in Schneider, 2008) explains that our stories and the reality they represent reflect our Aboriginal consciousness (p. 38) and story as research method nurtured that consciousness.

Keeshing-Tobias (as cited in Archibald, 1997) writes that "stories are power. They reflect the deepest, the most intimate perceptions, relationships, and attitudes of a people. Stories show how a people, a culture, thinks" (p. 101). I experienced the power of the research story to bring people together and to teach us.

Storytelling supported several aspects of the research, which were important in learning more about working together to center and legitimate Mi'kmaw knowledge in education. Narrative, as a research tool, allowed for multiple voices and multiple truths, it brought about wholeness, it made the role of scholar and educator synonymous with storyteller, and it provided an opportunity for co-researchers.

Multiple voices and multiple truths

Stories entice people because everyone is part of a story and everyone has a story. I watched the research story drawing people into it, engaging both Mi'kmaw community members and school staff. Everyone wanted to hear a good story.

Storytelling is a space where many voices can participate. The research story wove together the voices of Mi'kmaw community members who often are not heard in the public school curriculum. It also brought the suppressed voices of the past into the teaching of Mi'kmaw history. Storytelling methodology also validated voices that communicate in a different way, such as those of Crow, Mi'kmwesu, and the Salmon People. As Gosse (2008) explains, "Storytelling is a very powerful way that we learn from each other and exchange and build knowledge" (p. 67).

Stories can accommodate multiple truths. If, as Coryn (2006) writes, research is a "truth-seeking activity" (p. 124), then stories, including trickster stories, are at the center of research and trickster is part of the multiplicity of truth. The research story represented the perspectives of the Mi'kmaw community and the school staff, and in so doing, it encompassed both Aboriginal world view and Western world view. Swanson (2008) writes:

narrative opens up a space for addressing responsibly the moral, political, and ethical paradoxes and dilemmas of the human experience through embracing pluralized perspectives in ways that give meaning and form to those experiences as lived. (p. 88)

As the research story is retold, each listener learns from the story based in his/her own needs and place in his/ her own learning journey. As I share this version of the story, the people who lived it with me add to it. Often they make comments that begin with words such as “remember...” or “what about...” followed by a story connected to or embellishing a particular part of our research experience. This reminds me of the learning circles, when participants shared their memories, knowledge, and thoughts about salmon. The retelling and reliving of the research through respectful relationships is a collaborative experience and, as such, it is an opportunity to enhance our relational skills (Kovach, 2009).

Connelly’s and Clandinin’s (1990) explain that

as we engage in a reflective research process, our stories are often restoried and changed as we, as teachers and/ or researchers, "give back" to each other ways of seeing our stories. I tell you a researcher's story. You tell me what you heard and what it meant to you. I hadn't thought of it this way, am transformed in some important way, and tell the story differently the next time I encounter an interested listener or talk again with my participant. (p. 5)

In each telling and retelling, we weave the threads of relationship back and forth amongst ourselves; we heal. In living and creating new stories, we spin new threads that bind us together. And when we recognize that we are creating and living a new story, we have darned together the holes and gaps in the fabric of interconnectivity. At that point, the story has taken on a life of its own and it becomes the teacher. Elder Shirley Sterling (as cited in Archibald, 1997) says that a story “takes on a life of its own and it travels

from person to person and it takes a different shape, but there's something the same” (p.108). Archibald refers to this phenomenon as ‘the power of a story’ to become a teacher and to emotionally heal the story participants (p. 106).

The story enabled us to see our collaborative experiences holistically; it was “our” story. We could see ourselves as tied together and we better understood the importance of working together. The barriers between the community members and the staff began to crumble under the weight of a collective story of learning. As I contemplated the healing that took place amongst the people, I thought of Lopez’s (1990) story of Crow and Weasel, particularly the part where Badger speaks to the two characters.

The stories people tell have a way of taking care of them. If stories come to you, care for them. And learn to give them away where they are needed. Sometimes a person needs a story more than food to stay alive. That is why we put these stories in each other’s memory. This is how people care for themselves. (p. 60)

I concluded that we needed the research story; the story of our work in the salmon project and in the teaching of Mi’kmaq Studies. We needed the story because the story reconnected us to our traditions, to one another, and to all things in the Web of Life.

The collective retellings of the story are like the learning circles where multiple truths and multiple perspectives were shared. I watched as people were developing deeper relationships. When sharing our truths and listening to the truths of others, we open our minds and our hearts to knowledge that is outside of our own personal knowledge. In opening our hearts and minds, we (re)search or search again for learning

and understanding between one another. Thus sharing gives legitimacy to different ways of knowing and understanding the world. Relationship work requires that we think in a new way in order to heal and strengthen our connections to one another. Respectful relationships are the fabric from which we can recreate education.

Wholeness

Stories bring us together with all our relations and we share. It is in story that parts come together as a whole. It is a place of balance. “Balance is a symbolic healing sense that life can go on” (Vizenor, as cited in Blaeser, 1996 p. 71) and “by seeking balance in and through story, then we can continue” (Blaeser, 1996, p. 71). In the reciprocity of telling and listening, there is an (ac)knowledgment that begins the healing or the repairing and strengthening of relationship threads.

I have reflected on the values that address wholeness: respect and reciprocity. These are the underpinnings of Indigenous philosophy, a philosophy that Ermine (2000) refers to as “Indigenous narrative”. He writes that Indigenous narrative has “rich potential for new, often forgotten paradigms of knowledge that have the potential to benefit all of humanity” (p. 53). The research story is important because it speaks to the importance of people working together in respectful ways in order to focus on Mi’kmaw knowledge in formal education. It is our willingness and ability to develop harmonious relationships that is the core of the work.

Story telling is a very powerful way that we learn from each other and exchange and build knowledge (Gosse, 2008, p. 67). Collaborative stories, those created through respect and sharing, bring about balance and harmony and create healing that restores relationships. In the research story lines, we could weave the past and present, the

school and the Mi'kmaw community, the Indigenous world view and the Western/Eurocentric world view, and the celebrations and the challenges.

Albert Marshall's notion of Two-Eyed Seeing (2010) and Garrett's (1996) Rule of Opposites both offer philosophical approaches that embrace wholeness. I now think of collaboration as intentionally and diligently weaving together our stories by repairing and strengthening the fabric of our lives. A cornerstone of Mi'kmaw knowledge, the interrelationship of all things, was signified in our collaboration. Rather than packaging Mi'kmaw knowledge in curriculum and offering it up to students, we lived the knowledge through our work.

The role of the researcher

When I approached the research, I considered that as researcher, I was taking on the responsibility to bear witness and to tell about what I had witnessed. Tina said, "You tell them. You tell them what we can do; what we did" (personal communication, April 24, 2009). This guided my storyteller role to assert the ability and the strength of the community. I was to tell the world about Wildcat First Nation, about the salmon project in the community, about how the community was the site of learning, and how it opened itself to the school and the greater community so all those interested could join the circle.

Ceglowski (2008) passes on to me what she learned from Norm Deinzen in a methodology class.

He told us that if we chose to conduct research in the way that he described, it was a choice that would stay with us. You couldn't research and write in the way

he advocated and produce a dissertation that resembled a standard model of writing up interviews and field notes. He was calling us to work with those we studied in new ways, to understand our work as entering into relationship with others, and writing in novel and inviting ways.

As the researcher, I immersed myself in the power of story to guide my learning. I identify with Cox's (2008) description of herself as "a scholar, weaving together the stitches of the disintegrated whole" (p. 99). The threads of this story have taught me well.

After reading the dissertation to Todd, he smiled and remarked, "You got it. That's it!" (personal communication, December 5, 2009). Crow nods in agreement.

Silence⁷⁹

⁷⁹ “In the silence that followed, Weasel said very softly, ‘It is good to be alive. To have friends, to have a family, to have children, to live in a particular place. These relationships are sacred’ (Lopez, 1990, p. 79).”

POSTSCRIPT

On-going collaboration

In September 2009, the circle of those involved in moving an Aboriginal education agenda forward widened as more teachers and community members joined the discussion. The group discussed ways in which the community and the school could continue to work together. Everyone agreed that an annual salmon project is an important part of the continued work. We also discussed the curricula that are open to Aboriginal knowledge. I felt optimistic when I heard several teachers offer to incorporate Mi'kmaw teachings into their lessons.

Through out the discussion, Battiste's (2002) guidelines were present in my head:

To affect reform, educators need to make a conscious decision to nurture Indigenous knowledge, dignity, identity, and integrity by making a direct change in school philosophy, pedagogy, and practice. They need to develop missions and purposes that carve out time and space to connect with the wisdom and traditions of Indigenous knowledge. They need to teach holistic and humanistic connections to local and collective relationships. They need to generate educational space that allows them to be challenging, caring, inspiring, and alert to their students' intellectual travails and attuned to their inner conditions. They need to make educational opportunities for students to come together in community with people who bring out their holistic better selves. Only when these changes in thought and behaviour are made can we create an educational system that is a place of connectedness and caring, a place that honours the heritage, knowledge, and spirit of every First Nations student. (p. 30-31)

I knew that we were not yet in that place. However, our relationships were stronger and we were better able to work along with Idea. We were sharing and we were respectful. Relationships were continuing to take precedence (Wilson, 2008, p. 118).

Because of the very low number of students registered, there was no Mi'kmaw Studies course this year. I wanted to continue to teach Mi'kmaw history both because, as Jamie said, it helps Mi'kmaw community members heal, and because history is a formal curriculum where the Western worldview of colonial history must be challenged. In an effort to continue with this work in the absence of Mi'kmaw Studies, I talked to the Canadian History teacher, Barbara Rhodenizer, and offered to teach an Aboriginal perspective on Canadian history. My intent was to challenge the dominant history and to honour and teach alternative histories, strategies that Iseke-Barnes (2008) describes as ways to access Indigenous knowledges (p. 141). Barbara agreed to this co-teaching.

There was resistance from students. Some complained that they had not enrolled in native studies. This stance, that native studies courses are the only curriculum that can provide teachings of Aboriginal history, marginalizes Aboriginal knowledge and history. Several students demanded explanations as to why I was teaching Aboriginal history as part of Canadian history and some wrote letter to the principal to formalize their complaints in a to the principal. Barbara and I had many talks with the students, making clear to them that I was teaching required components of the Canadian History course. On several occasions, I went over the curriculum guide to point out the required Aboriginal content in the course. I was using the existing curriculum to legitimate my teaching and to bring a Two-Eyed approach to the study of history.

I felt very committed to this teaching and the responsibility to share the knowledge that I have. Iseke-Barnes (2003) reminded me that “part of resistance is coming to know what one knows and to take action upon that knowledge. One location for that action is within educational locations” (p. 233). In reflecting on my feelings at the time, I am reminded of Todd explaining that we are responsible for sharing the knowledge that we have but that we leave it up to others as to whether or not they will accept that knowledge.

Teaching Aboriginal history challenged students to think critically about history, colonization, and power. It encouraged them to take responsibility for their own actions, including the initiative to learn other histories (Iseke-Barnes, 2008). The resistance to my teaching dissipated over the school year and students occasionally made remarks such as “I never knew that before” in response to a lesson. The discussion of residential schools was one such example. The residential school for Atlantic Canada, the Shubenacadie Indian Residential School, is about a two hour drive from North Queens School. The legacy of the residential schools is not something to be read about in a text or something that happened elsewhere. The stories we heard and listened to, the location we talked about, and the cultural genocide that took place all happened in our region, to people and by people from this region. It is more difficult to deny and resist when the stories are not someone else’s stories but they are our stories.

What resulted from our co-teaching of Canadian History was very powerful. It brought the resistance to First Nations history into the open where it could be discussed directly. There was no choice about taking Canadian History because it was the only senior high social studies course being offered. Taking Canadian History, rather than

Mi'kmaw Studies, was no longer a way to opt out of learning more about Aboriginal history. No one commented that the sections of the course I taught, the Aboriginal sections, were any easier than any other section of the course. In using this approach to teaching First Nations history, there can be no marginalization of the history, no complaints that the course is 'not real', 'not up to standards', 'not relevant', 'not educational', and 'not structured'. It seems paradoxical that after all the lobbying that Tina and I did to have Mi'kmaw Studies taught in the school, I can now see that not teaching it this year was an opportunity to bring about change in another way.

One day Tina and I reflected on the school year and the increased opportunities there were to move an Aboriginal education agenda forward. We talked about the curriculum openings as "cracks." Tina amusingly referred to these as "wisecracks," the spaces that we wisely step into and work to widen, expanding possibilities of incorporating Mi'kmaw knowledge in the public school curriculum (personal communication June 3, 2010).

Continuing the salmon project

In the early spring, Todd and I discussed the salmon project for the current school year. We planned that both the school and the community would each have tanks in which to hatch three hundred salmon, the number provided by the fish hatchery when groups ask to participate in the salmon hatchery program. Unfortunately, for reasons having to do with the time of the application to acquire the eggs, Wildcat First Nation could not obtain salmon eggs from the hatchery. We decided that we would share and so we split the three hundred eggs that were allocated to the school. One hundred and fifty salmon hatched in Wildcat First Nation and one hundred and fifty salmon hatched in

North Queens School. That gave all interested participants easy access to daily observations of the hatching process, and everyone was encouraged to visit both sites. The salmon and participants were brought together for a release ceremony where we talked, smudged, drummed, sang, and ate together. Through this work, we continue to restore, strengthen, and broaden our relationships.

The members of Wildcat First Nation continue to share their knowledge with school staff and through our collaborative work, Mi'kmaw knowledge is valued and legitimated. The research and the continuing salmon project have given the community a rebirth and the community members had a new sense of themselves as Mi'kmaw people (personal communication, March 15, 2009). Like the salmon eggs, they are continuing to grow and change and, so too, is the relationship between the school staff and the community.

I continue to strengthen my relationship to the land. I take walks, do my personal ceremonies, and talk with Crow, the trickster who is ever present. He still tells me stories and pushes my thinking about Aboriginal education. Although committed to a text format, this research story continues to grow and, in so doing, I continue to learn from it.

“So, you want to know about developing Aboriginal education?” Crow says. I nod my head. “Did you ever hear the story about the people and the salmon?” and then he begins⁸⁰...

Msit Nokmaq

⁸⁰ Monture-Angus (1995) writes: “This story does not have an end. It goes on and on and on. When I am done telling this one, I can tell you another one and another one and another one. I want to know and I want to believe that it makes a difference. That what I have struggled with will make a difference to my son and to his children and to those who come after. We have an obligation to those children to see that there is something here for them, but I am scared that is not happening and it is not happening fast enough” (p. 23).

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