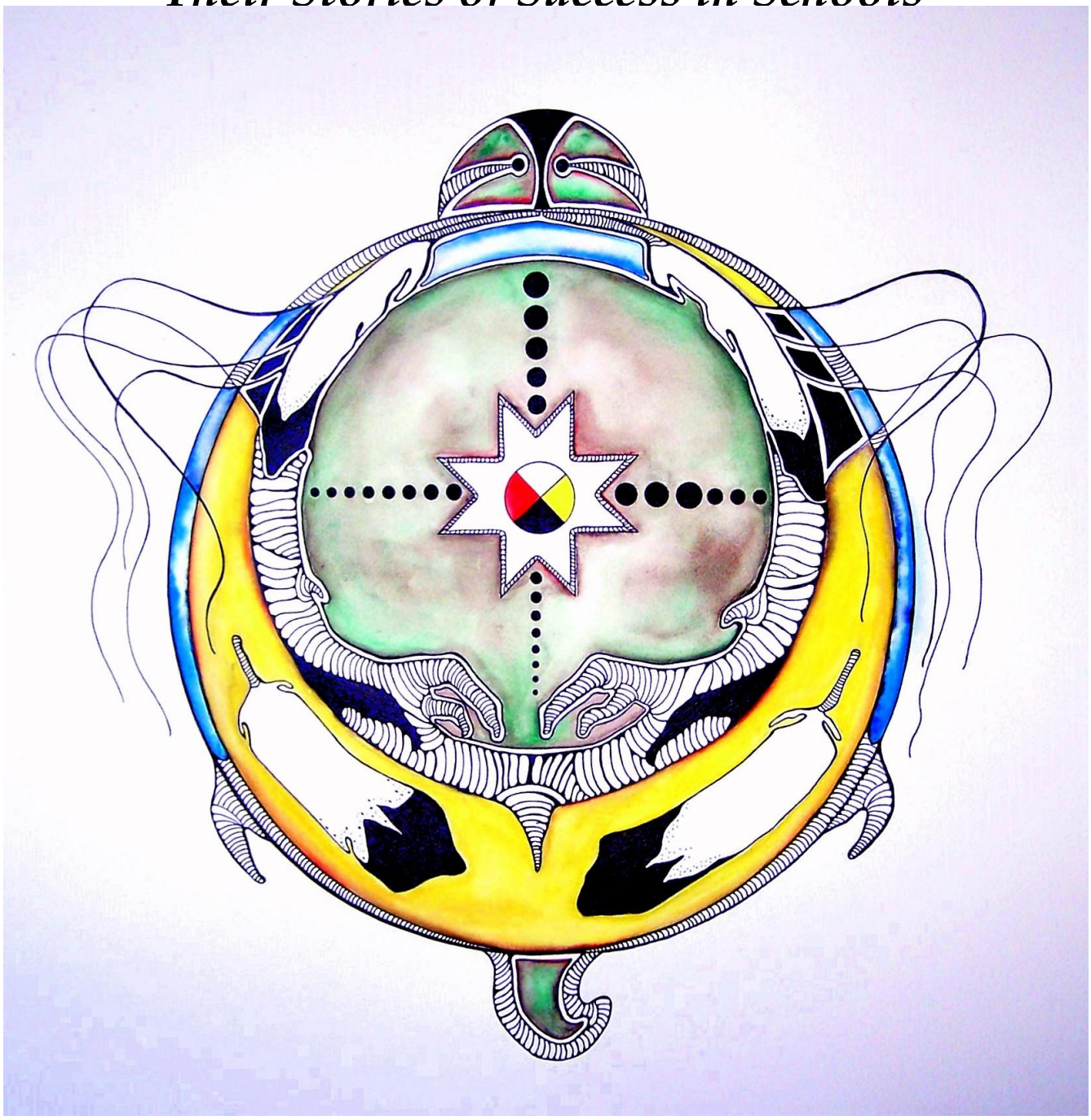
Celebrating Strengths: Aboriginal Students and Their Stories of Success in Schools



SEVEN OAKS
SCHOOL DIVISION
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Celebrating Strengths: Aboriginal Students and Their Stories of Success in Schools

By

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Foreward

As the newly appointed Elder-in-Residence for Seven Oaks School Division, it is a pleasure to share my thoughts on the importance of Aboriginal perspectives in today's public school system.

By way of introduction, I am a retired educator with over 40 years of experience. However, staying current with the present happenings in Aboriginal Education is my passion so I take my role as an Aboriginal Elder-in-Residence very seriously.

I have been blessed to have had a wide scope of educational work experience including classroom teacher, school counsellor, Principal, Education Director and Dean of Aboriginal Education at Red River College. These experiences have provided me with an incredible wealth of stories from students, colleagues, parents, community people as well as Aboriginal Elders. I willingly share these stories so that Aboriginal peoples can once again walk with pride and honour.

I am also a Residential School Survivor.

The importance of including Aboriginal perspectives in today's public school system cannot be understated given the abysmal education system that was imposed on Aboriginal peoples through the racist policy of the residential school system. On June 11, 2008, the Canadian government publicly apologized for this atrocity but the legacy of it lingers on and is still evident in society today including our schools.

Seven Oaks School Division recognizes these educational inequalities of the past and has taken several initiatives, most notably continual dialogue addressing the issues that still beset our school system today.

Chief Sitting Bull once said, "Let's put our minds together and see what we can do for our children." So, let us continue the dialogue and pursue what constitutes the best education for all students, educators and community members in Seven Oaks School Division.

Kitchi Miigwetch

Mary Courchene
Wabanoahwun Ikwe

In Seven Oaks we assist our students to gain an education that improves both their life and our community, for today and for tomorrow. *"Celebrating Strengths: Aboriginal Students and Their Stories of Success in Schools"* celebrates what we do and challenges us to do better. Each and every child deserves a school experience that supports the development of a strong sense of identity, a feeling of belonging, positive peer associations and persistent caring relationships with adults. We want our Aboriginal students to see themselves reflected in the staff of their schools, to see their history, culture and ways of knowing valued in our curricula and class activities.

There is much to learn from our Aboriginal peoples and so much for which to thank them. They kept our European ancestors from starvation and taught them the skills to make it through the harsh Manitoba winter. Today their sharing circle helps us to pause, really listen and understand one another. Their traditional regard for mother earth teaches us to be good environmental stewards so that we can pass on a healthy world to our children and grandchildren.

As educators we must listen and listen well. We must give our absolute best as teachers to our Aboriginal young people. Their success in our schools is vital to all of our futures.

On behalf of the Board of Trustees and the Superintendent's Team, I thank those involved in this research project. Their efforts have brought these stories to us. Their work brings us richer understandings. Their caring and passion enriches our Seven Oaks Community of Learners.

Brian O'Leary
Superintendent

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We extend our deepest thanks to the keepers of the stories that have been shared with us ….

Glossary

Aboriginal Peoples is a collective name for the original peoples of North America and their descendants. The Canadian Constitution (*Constitution Act, 1982*) recognizes three groups of Aboriginal peoples—Indians, Métis and Inuit. These are three separate peoples with unique heritages, languages, cultural practices and spiritual beliefs (Carpenter, 2010).

Anishinaabe is an Ojibwe term that is often translated as "real people" or "original people" (Steckley & Cummins, 2008).

Elder does not have to be a certain age to be called an Elder and just because someone is older does not mean they are an Elder. An Elder in the Aboriginal community is someone who is recognized by the community as an Elder. An Elder is someone who passes on traditional ways, teachings, and ceremony. They offer guidance; particularly spiritual guidance (Stiegelbauer, 1996; Reed, 1999).

First Nations came into common usage in the early 1980s to replace the term 'band' or 'Indian'. Many people prefer to be called First Nations or First Nations people instead of Indians or Aboriginal. The term should not be a synonym for Aboriginal peoples because it does not include Inuit or Métis. The term First Nations people generally applies to both Status and Non-Status Indians (Information Centre on Aboriginal Health, 2009).

Indian "collectively describes all the Indigenous people in Canada who are not Inuit or Métis. Indian people are one of three peoples recognized as Aboriginal in the *Constitution Act* of 1982 along with Inuit and Métis. In addition, three categories apply to Indians in Canada: Status Indians, Non-Status Indians and Treaty Indians … The term Indian is considered outdated by many people, and there is much debate over whether to continue using this term" (Information Centre on Aboriginal Health, 2009, p. 3-4). The term Indian was used by participants in this research when speaking about themselves. However, participants used it when referring to both First Nations and Métis people.

Métis is French for "mixed blood" and are often known as people of mixed heritage. The *Constitution Act* of 1982 recognizes Métis as one of the three Aboriginal peoples of Canada (Reed, 1999; Information Centre on Aboriginal Health, 2009).

Native is a word similar in meaning to Aboriginal. Native peoples is a collective term to describe the descendants of the original peoples of North America. The term is increasingly seen as outdated (particularly when used as a noun) and is starting to lose acceptance" (Information Centre on Aboriginal Health, 2009, p. 5). However, participants in this project use the term Native when referring to themselves or other Aboriginal people.

Turtle Island is a term used by Aboriginal people when speaking about North America. The term originates from a traditional teaching of creation (Bruchac, 1991; King, 2003).

Introduction

The Seven Oaks School Division has an ongoing commitment to seek ways to make education meaningful for all students in our community. In order to do so we frequently raise the questions of what constitutes a good education? For whom is it good? Who gets to decide? How might we become better?

There is another question that has been raised many times. It has surfaced during professional development sessions with new teachers' groups and school staffs. It has come up during study sessions within the administrator groups and leadership cohorts. It is a question that has arisen in conversations with parents, trustees and students and one that has emerged during the conversations among committee members who have been working on this research. It is the question: "Why does the school division continue to ask educators to examine their knowledge, perceptions, assumptions and actions regarding the experiences of our Aboriginal students in Seven Oaks?" That question is often followed with a second question: "In an ethnically diverse school district, why does the school division persist in raising complex questions about Aboriginal peoples' experiences with the contemporary school system?"

The Seven Oaks School Division has a student population of approximately 9600. In the 1990s schools in some areas of the division began to see an increase in the numbers of Aboriginal families moving into their catchment areas. Some families were relocating from the core area of the city and others were part of a population migration into the urban area from First Nations and Métis communities. Many high school students (age 14 or older) relocated to access high school education. In some instances families relocated into the Seven Oaks School Division community because they were able to acquire housing provided for Aboriginal people who required urgent and long term medical care available only in the city.

In the early to mid 1990s it had become apparent that some of the division's Aboriginal students were struggling. Based on anecdotal data and some tracking of attendance, graduation and course completion rates the division began to try to understand and to better respond to the needs of Aboriginal students and their families. Some schools began to search for ways to help students and their families with the transition into new schools and attempts were made to incorporate Aboriginal perspectives into curricula, into school structures and into the cultural fabric of the school community. As a result, Aboriginal Community Liaison workers were hired. In addition, Native Studies courses were offered in some high schools and Aboriginal language courses were available, at no cost, as part of the division's Heritage Language programs. All divisional staff were afforded multiple opportunities to learn more about Aboriginal history, cultures and perspectives and to engage in long term study around the complexities of working collaboratively to improve the education of our Aboriginal students.

However, the experiences of our students seemed to reflect what was happening across Canada. A report released by the Canadian Council on Learning (2007) entitled *State of Learning in Canada: No Time for Complacency*, states:

> In 2001, 57% of Aboriginal people between the ages of 20 and 24 had at least completed high school, a steady increase from 38% in 1981. Still, the proportion of young Aboriginal adults who had not completed high school was more than 2.5 times higher than among the non-Aboriginal population. (p. 74)

The Aboriginal peoples in Canada in 2006 (2008): Inuit, Métis and First Nations, 2006 Census confirmed that although some progress had been made in increasing graduation rates among Aboriginal students there remained serious challenges and inequities. According to the 2006 data of the total (Canadian) Aboriginal identity population aged 25-34, 31.91% did not have a high school certificate, degree or diploma. In the Manitoba data it was stated that 38.23% of Aboriginal people aged 25-34 did not have a high school certificate, degree or diploma and in Winnipeg the figure was 27.02%.

This confirmed what we were continuing to experience: Aboriginal students were not achieving the same graduation rate as non-Aboriginal students in our division. Trustees, school administrators, parents and educators continued to raise the question: "How might the school division provide a better education for all our students?"

Whatever our personal understandings and biases each and every member of the Seven Oaks School Division has a moral responsibility to work together to improve the educational experiences of Aboriginal students. To understand our present we must look to our past.

Aboriginal Education: An Historical Perspective

The very roots of our history rise from an Aboriginal civilization which was strong, healthy and helpful to the newcomers to Turtle Island who faced starvation and disease upon arrival. Prior to contact with the Europeans, First Nations peoples had complex social and economic systems that had organized their lives for thousands of years. Yet, to this day, very few Canadians are aware of this rich, pre-colonial history.

As educators who have been raised in Eurocentric school systems within a Eurocentric society, it has been difficult to identify and set aside some of our assumptions and theories as they relate to Aboriginal students, families and cultures. Marie Battiste (2002) discusses some of the distortions in how Aboriginal peoples have been viewed:

> Culture has itself been implicated in a process of postmodern deconstruction. Postmodernist scholars have noted that culture is often viewed as what the inferior "other" has. While some peoples have civilizations, philosophies, romance languages, or cultured societies; other peoples have cultures, dialects, worldviews, and tribal knowledge. Peoples with "civilizations" are regarded as inherently superior to peoples with "cultures." Much literature in the last decade has focused on the importance of diverse cultural or multicultural methodologies to support diverse teaching methods to address the needs of Aboriginal students. The studies, however, do not examine the culture of the schools themselves to see what counts as knowledge and truth and what does not. They do not study what, or whom, the curriculum and pedagogy represses, excludes, or disqualifies. Nor do they examine who continually benefits from education and how these students are consistently rewarded and nourished in schools where white privilege is normalized. (Battiste, 2002, p. 16)

Without knowledge of Canada's colonial history, it is at times difficult for non-Aboriginal people to fully understand the long term, intergenerational impact of government policies designed to eradicate Aboriginal culture, religion and language, especially through the residential school system. It is not uncommon to hear a non-Aboriginal person, wondering out loud why this "past history" of residential schools and other policies remains an impediment to Aboriginal success in education. Other cultural groups have come to Canada, at times under duress, and have used education as a catalyst to build a better life. Why is the experience so different for many of our Aboriginal students?

First Nations peoples form the senior founding pillar of Canadian society. Canadian philosopher, John Ralston Saul (2008), describes Canada as a Métis civilization which has grown out of centuries of Indigenous civilization, the founding pillar, followed by several centuries of French and English immigration, thus creating what he refers to as the "triangular reality" of Canada. The complexity and richness of the Canadian identity continues to be further enriched by more recent waves of immigrants.

Newcomers who immigrate to Canada most often arrive with the hopes for a new and better future. There are some who have experienced tragedy, suffering and poverty in their homelands or along their journey to Canada. They may face challenges as they try to settle into this new country. Yet there is hope for the future and trust in the ideal that a public education will provide the children with a door to a much better world.

Hope for a better future was once at the core of Aboriginal communities who initially believed that education would be a viable route for their children to acquire the knowledge and skills to live in the new Euro-Canadian society. They did not anticipate that their vision for a better future would end in catastrophe. The residential school era, which began in Ontario in the 1830s, marked the beginning of a period of intentional attempts to destabilize the Aboriginal population. The promise of an educational school system was initially supported through treaty negotiations and agreements with the Crown. However, this promise was betrayed through the establishment of residential schools. Over time, it became evident that the Crown's purpose was to assimilate First Nations youth into a Eurocentric culture while at the same time eradicating Aboriginal cultures and languages. Nonetheless, residential schools continued to exist in some parts of Canada until as recently as 1988.

Residential school children were separated from their families, Elders (teachers), culture, and languages. In many instances they were subjected to physical abuse, sexual abuse, emotional abuse and to public humiliation. This resulted in a deep rooted distrust of the educational system which has carried forward to this day. In her book, *Finding My Talk*, Agnes Grant (2004) writes, "Never again will people from outside the culture determine how First Nations children will be educated. Never again will people from outside the culture be given the opportunity to destroy what the people themselves value" (p. 2).

Families suffered immeasurably. Prolonged absences from families and from reserve life prevented many children from developing healthy relationships with parents and strong

connections to their community. Parents, who themselves were survivors of residential schools, had become disconnected from the traditional ways of nurturing and raising healthy and happy children. In some instances tensions between children and parents arose as children blamed their parents for allowing them to be taken to residential schools where the parents themselves had been abused and neglected.

In Elizabeth Bear's narrative in the book *Finding My Talk* (Grant, 2004), her ambivalent relationship with her mother can be understood as an outcome of the physical and emotional distance created between children and parents through the residential schools. Elizabeth had attended the Guy Hill Residential School near The Pas, Manitoba. Agnes Grant writes:

> For Elizabeth, the Guy Hill experience was hurtful and distressing. The pain of the residential school, however, was superimposed on a much deeper pain. She lived with emotional neglect from the day she was born. She understands today that the pain and separation inflicted on her by the school system was mild compared to the desolation she felt within her family. (p. 180)

Marlene Starr, in the forward to *Finding My Talk*, states:

> I am Ojibway from Sandy Bay First Nation in Manitoba. My formal schooling began in Sandy Bay Residential School in 1963. I did my time for seven years, and there were four significant lessons I learned in that institution. I learned how to be silent and how to be obedient to authority. I learned that being "Indian" is to be inferior. I also learned how to read and write. (p. vii)

Unfortunately, many of these "lessons" (of inferiority) have had intergenerational effects and we are only now beginning to hear the stories of courageous adults who have struggled to find their identities as Aboriginal people. And it is through their stories that we are now beginning to understand the long-term, intergenerational impacts of residential schools.

The residential school system was set within a Canadian context that further eroded the trust relationship between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal peoples. Policies of the Canadian government also contributed to the suppression of Aboriginal peoples. In *The Truth About Stories* Thomas King (2003) writes:

> Canada, which is generally seen as lagging behind the United States in most things—capitalism, taxation, aggression—actually took the lead in legislating Indians out of existence with the 1876 Indian Act.
>
> It would be too torturous a journey to try to explicate the Indian Act at one sitting, for it is a magical piece of legislation that twists and slides through time, transforming itself and the lives of Native people at every turn. And sprinkled throughout the act, which among other things paternalistically defines who is an Indian and who is not, are amendments that can make Indians disappear in a twinkle.
>
> An 1880 amendment allowed for the automatic enfranchisement of any Indian who obtained a university degree.
> Get a degree and, poof, you're no longer an Indian.

> Serve in the military and, abracadabra, you're no longer an Indian.
> Become a clergyman or a lawyer and, presto, no more Indian.
>
> Legislative magic.
>
> Duncan Campbell Scott, the deputy superintendent general of Indian affairs (among other things), speaking candidly in 1920 of Canadian Indian Policy said, "Our object is to continue until there is not a single Indian in Canada that has not been absorbed into the body politic and there is no Indian question, and no Indian department."
>
> Hocus-pocus!
>
> Indian. Now you see them. Now you don't. (p. 132-133)

Despite a long history of destructive policies our Aboriginal population across Canada is rebounding. John Ralston Saul (2008) notes that "Canadians as a whole will be increasingly dependent—once again—on a healthy relationship with Aboriginals and upon the stability of the Aboriginal cultures" (p. 25).

It is within this historical/contemporary context that the Seven Oaks School Division continues to ask the questions:

What constitutes a good education?
For whom is it good?
Who gets to decide?
How might we become better?

The Study

As a result of the questions being raised, the Seven Oaks School Division extended, to all staff, "an invitation to participate in a research project exploring Aboriginal perspectives in education" (March, 2006).

From this, a group of 18 teachers, school administrators, superintendents and student support staff from the Seven Oaks School Division formed a study/research committee. In addition to divisional staff, Joannie Halas, a scholar with extensive experience working with Aboriginal youth in intercultural spaces served as an advisor to the committee. The committee was comprised almost equally of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal members and was honoured to have Elder Mary Courchene to consult at various points during the study and to work with the entire committee as the research progressed.

For the first two years the work of the committee consisted primarily of reviewing research literature that focused on Aboriginal education as well as the research and educational experiences of Aboriginal peoples. This, of course, included readings about the residential school experiences and the long term impact colonization has had upon the Aboriginal peoples of Canada. The committee members studied and engaged in dialogue around issues related to ethical research methodologies that are respectful of Aboriginal

cultures and that contribute positively to the Aboriginal community. It was concluded that it was important to have Aboriginal epistemologies along with community voice and cultural advisors to guide this research.

The research purpose was defined: *To identify from the perspectives of former Seven Oaks School Division Aboriginal students, factors which have contributed positively to their school experience.*

As a means to connect with potential research participants, the school division used local newspapers as well as Aboriginal newspapers throughout Manitoba to invite former Aboriginal students of the Seven Oaks School Division to contact us to discuss the research project and to volunteer as participants. School newsletters, personal contacts extended to graduates and information to divisional staff were other means taken to invite participation and to create awareness. As a result, six extensive interviews were conducted. In each interview participants were invited to reflect upon their school experiences. *Thinking back to when you were a student in the Seven Oaks School Division, what contributed positively to your overall school experience?* In order to provide a full context to their experience, we also asked participants to reflect upon any negative experiences. Finally, we asked for their suggestions on how to improve upon the educational experience for Aboriginal students. Pseudonyms were used throughout this paper.

Each interview team was comprised of two researchers, one of whom was Aboriginal. In the conversations that took place prior to the interviews there was an attempt made to inform participants as fully as possible about the purposes of the research, the format of the interviews, the ethics which would guide the research and the ways in which their contributions to the research might improve education.

While six interviews provide only a small representation of the overall Aboriginal student population in the Seven Oaks School Division, the stories told offer key insights into our overarching question:

What constitutes a good education?

About Narrative

Narrative provides a way of understanding one's life, a way of overcoming silence, a way of giving voice.

> There is a story I know. It's about the earth and how it floats in space on the back of a turtle. I've heard this story many times, and each time someone tells the story, it changes. Sometimes the change is simply in the voice of the storyteller. Sometimes the change is in the details. Sometimes in the order of events. Other times it's the dialogue or the response of the audience. But in all the tellings of all the tellers, the world never leaves the turtle's back. And the turtle never swims away.

> One time, it was in Prince Rupert I think, a young girl in the audience asked about the turtle and the earth. If the earth was on the back of a turtle, what was below the turtle? Another turtle, the storyteller told her. And below that turtle? Another turtle. And below that? Another turtle. (King, 2003, p. 1)

This quote from *The Truth About Stories* helps us to think about the richness of narrative as a means of inviting readers or listeners into the story of another while recognizing that their own experiences and perspectives will influence the depths to which they are able to understand the meaning in each encounter with the story. Readers are privileged to be invited to *visit* the story of another while remaining cognizant both of the situatedness of their own seeing and thinking and that of the other's (Biesta, 2006). Biesta states, "Visiting is therefore *not* seeing through the eyes of someone else, but to see *with your own eyes* from a position that is not your own-or to be more precise, in a story very different from one's own" (p. 91).

Indigenous knowledge traditionally has been preserved and passed along through oral tradition. The use of narrative in the context of this research enables the reader to be a listener to a story thereby "animating the voices and experiences of the cognitive 'other' and integrating them into the educational process" (Battiste, 2002, p. 5). As individuals read and reread the stories, as the narratives are shared among Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal colleagues, students, parents and scholars it is hoped that the layers of "turtles" will begin to appear. It is, at times, very difficult for those turtles to be seen, as readers must be willing to set aside their own assumptions in order to hear … to see the other.

The narratives that follow have had the interviewers' questions removed so that the stories of the research participants speak for themselves. In the circle of this research the written narratives have been shared with the keepers of the stories to be respectful and connected to the sources.

The Narrative of ...

CAROL

> Carol's family is from the Métis Community of St. Maurice, Manitoba. She attended Seven Oaks schools from Grades 1-6, moved to Winnipeg School Division for late French Immersion from Grades 7-10, and returned to Seven Oaks to complete her education for Grades 11 and 12. She obtained a Bachelor of Education degree from the University of Manitoba and a diploma in Aboriginal Child Care from Red River Community College.

I started school early. I started Kindergarten when I was 4 because I was born in January. And, I know that I was ready. My mother worked with me a lot when I was younger. She helped me a lot in terms of reading; I read by the time I was 3. I think that really helped. I picked up things quite quickly and I picked them up early—you know being exposed to reading at an early age really helped me become successful.

There was only one negative thing that I can recall ever happening in school and I know that nowadays that wouldn't happen because they wouldn't stand for it anymore. I remember I was in Grade 2 and our teacher was off for a while with a broken leg and we had a substitute. I guess I was one of those kids that sometimes talks too much and I remember the teacher, a male, taking me to the corner of the room and shaking me, like taking me by the shoulders and shaking me. Now, a teacher would get fired in an instant. That was a negative thing.

I was involved in clubs and activities at school from the beginning. I was in gymnastics for seven years. In elementary school, I would always take part in that. In Junior High I played volleyball, also gymnastics. I really enjoyed taking cooking and sewing in high school. I looked forward to that. I always liked the gymnastics and becoming close to those instructors. Like the phys-ed teachers, they knew you by name even though there were 300 kids in the school.

My favourite part of school was all the activities. I'm the type of person who really loves school. I prefer it to working. I wish I was still in University just taking part in all the extra-curricular activities. I always loved music and taking part in plays at school and I played guitar for a number of years and participated in gymnastics. I was pretty active and I had a lot of friends. My mother says I wasn't shy of anything when I sang and played my guitar in front of people. My mother always supported me doing this. I never was one of those students that just sat there in the corner and didn't say a word.

Friends and family were a big support to me when I was in school. My friends would help me with my homework but a lot of times they couldn't help me with things like algebra. My family, we speak French, but we don't speak the proper French; we speak more the Métis French. But their knowing French was a huge resource when I was in French Immersion.

I don't even know if there were a lot of Aboriginal students back then when I was in school—there's probably more now I would think. But, back then, I don't know. My friends knew that I was Métis, but none of my friends were Aboriginal, so I don't think that there was a very high Aboriginal population in Seven Oaks School Division in the 80s.

Was there ever a time when my Métis identity was affirmed at school? I guess just telling my friends who I am and where I'm from but they probably didn't know until I told them in Grade 8 or 9 maybe. My best friend lived just 15 houses down the street from me and I always thought she was German. We were best friends growing up and it wasn't until she was 26 years old and had applied for a job at the Manitoba Métis Federation that I found out her mom was Métis.

I think my experiences were all positive. I never experienced any type of racism or anything like that. I don't recall anything negative. I don't know if it's because, if somebody looks at me, they probably can't tell that I'm Aboriginal. But I never hid my heritage. I told my friends that I'm Métis. My mother says that apart from my close friends no one knew I was Aboriginal. Was it important to me that no one knew that I was Aboriginal? No. I think that it was more important to me that they accepted my Aboriginal identity when they found out about it.

I don't recall ever learning about Aboriginal culture or Aboriginal perspectives in school. It was all about Christopher Columbus and nothing about topics like the fur trade. Now I know that as a teacher it's very important to teach students about the Aboriginal cultures. But, I don't recall ever really learning anything about it in school. That was probably something that I wish I would have learned more about. I learned a lot more after my schooling, post secondary, not in university but I also went to college and I got my Aboriginal Child Care Diploma. I learned a lot about Aboriginal culture there and through learning from my family members and stuff, but not really at school.

I think it would be a good idea to have an Aboriginal Lounge in schools. Students would be able to get together and support one another. I also read of a good idea that was currently in one newsletter, that a Divisional school was having a "feast". That would have been something good to have had when I was younger. They are also bringing in people to the schools to talk about topics such as "Festival Du Voyageur". I feel people need to learn more about Aboriginal cultures so that they don't harbour racist stereotypical attitudes about First Nations peoples—for example—learning about what my father told me of the true Métis culture of fishing, hunting, jigging and trapping. It wasn't about carrying a canoe over your head.

Being an Aboriginal student in the school community was just like in the larger community. Sometimes, I felt like we were the minority. You know like when I was going to school there weren't very many Aboriginal students at all—or at least they didn't say they were. There might have been a lot of Métis students and I had no idea that they were. Yeah, I thought that back then a lot of people if they were French were French, but I think 90% of the French are probably Métis.

As a mother of a student who is in Grade 7 in Seven Oaks School Division, I hope there is more Aboriginal content in classrooms. I want my son to be able to feel proud about who he is and to ask questions of the teachers about learning the Aboriginal culture. I think it would be good if he learned more about this project. And perhaps having people come in, have more Elders and community members come in and teach different things, like how to make dream catchers and bannock and have all Seven Oaks students and staff learn more about the Métis culture. That would help.

KARLA

> Karla is a 23 year old Métis woman who attended Seven Oaks Schools from Kindergarten to Grade 12. She is currently a Criminal Justice major at the University of Winnipeg.

I remember that in middle school I did a lot of creative writing and wrote a lot of poetry in my Grade 8 year. It was always extra-curricular stuff and my Grade 8 teacher, who I really liked, would always look at it for me and give me feedback. I write sad, depressing stuff, so in class he'd try to make me write funny things that I'm not good at writing. There was one assignment where he told me I had to write a funny story. It was an actual assignment, and I was like, "I'm completely lost." I wrote the most violent and gory thing I could think of. He wasn't impressed. But it was a good time because I didn't really have anybody else to read my writing then. I didn't want to give it to my parents and he was always very good about reading it for me. I still do a lot of writing.

In high school I had quit all of the vocal singing stuff which I loved because my first vocal teacher had made it very difficult for me. So I finally quit the course. I joined up for vocal music again when another teacher was hired. It was wonderful working with her—I loved doing all that vocal stuff with her. One of the times that I was sick she was just like, "Oh, you're sick, but now it's the end of the year, so we don't really have time to do this, but if you want I can just take your grade out of everything you've done beforehand because I understand that you're sick and it's probably going to hurt you to sing and I don't want to put you in pain." She had that kind of understanding and she made singing a lot more fun and about having fun. The first teacher made it about judgement and this made me shy to sing in front of other people.

There was also Mr. D. He was definitely very special to me. In high school all the other kids got annoying. By the middle of Grade 11, I was pretty sick of the things they talked about. They were talking about the same things since we were in Grade 9. So like, I sort of secluded myself. I got really into books. I read as I walked down the hall. All day! I was very good at hiding and not walking into people or the walls. I have a talent for walking and reading. The only time I came out of my books was when I was talking to Mr. D.

Schoolwork wasn't my priority. It is now, but in high school I was definitely guilty of reading under my desk. I just wanted to hide in my various books whether they were journals or novels. I started reading young. I'm not sure exactly how old I was, maybe 7 or 8, but I found *The Odyssey and the Ilyiad* in the school library and reading it had a surprisingly huge impact even to this day. There was also a copy of a book of poems by Edward Lear who was an epileptic poet in the 19th century. They weren't paperback but hardback books covered in cloth and I was attracted to them because they just looked really old and cool. I tried to buy them when I left that school actually. One of my friends suggested that I not return them on the last day of school, but I was like, "No, no. I could just buy them." But they wouldn't let me buy them. They said other kids took them out too, so I wasn't allowed to take them.

Back to high school. Mr. B. was another teacher who supported me in a non-questioning way. I missed quite a bit of his class in Grade 10. I wouldn't be surprised if I had been away more than I had been there and he never questioned it. There was one time I went to talk to him and just asked him, "I'm gone so much—don't you want to know why?" And he said, "No, you're doing what you need to do. There's something you need to do, so go do it." I passed with like an 80. I'm glad he helped me.

In Grade 12, I had the opportunity to take a university sociology course after school. I didn't quite realize at the time how useful that course was. It was sort of, just like, "Hey this is the way to learn more stuff." It seemed like a good time. My professor was wonderful. He also encouraged the Native education portion of it. One day he mentioned that he was going to go into a unit about residential schools and asked if I would talk about them first. I started looking into them then and my Mom helped me a lot with that because it was sort of heartbreaking. That was the first time I realized how bad it had been and that my great-grandmother had been in a residential school. I don't remember her at all but I'm about as close with my Papa (grandfather) as he'll let anybody be. And I didn't understand then, like I realize now, after all the research that I've done, why it is that he is as closed off as he is. It has a lot to do with how his mother treated him and with how she was treated in residential schools. As part of my presentation to the class, I ended up doing a smudge in the multipurpose room just having everybody sitting in a circle while I talked about residential schools.

I tried to take a second year sociology course in the spring term. It might have been that it was the spring term and it was a different professor, but it was terrifying. It was awful —like class every day for two hours, an assignment due within three days of being there. It was such a fast paced thing. It was three months crammed into three weeks. But, when he started talking about Neo-Marxism I was just like, "Whoa. This is scary" and I dropped it.

The first prof. was the reason that I started paying attention to residential schools. I had a difficult time with my mother since I was about 5 years old. I spent a large portion of my life rejecting her and everything to do with her and a lot of that was the Aboriginal culture. My Dad is German and Scottish and all sorts of really pale stuff. All my Native part comes from my mother and I had a good time ignoring her most of my life until I was 17. I think my Sociology professor knew my mother. I think that was why he asked me to do that research. But it made me start looking into it.

I can also remember negative examples, bad experiences at school. Being outside the smoking doors and hearing jokes, Indian jokes—this was a constant thing. Hearing people say that they had to reduce the speed limit down Main Street from 60 to 50 because of all the drunken Indians and all that stuff. It was really frustrating listening to that and then, when I'm trying to respond, people would say, "You're not Native. You're not an Indian. Come on, you're Métis. That's not you, you're not them." And yeah, it was really difficult.

Okay, so I have slightly less Aboriginal blood than First Nation people do but it's not really about blood. It's what you identify as. I identify as Métis which sometimes I sort of feel is like being the bisexual one on the sexuality continuum where it's like straight, bisexual, gay. Straight people can discriminate against gay people and gay people can discriminate against straight people in certain situations but bisexual people kind of get it from both sides 'cause they really happen to be both. Pick one or the other, right? And it was the same thing with being Métis.

I'm trying to think if I had any Aboriginal teachers or if there were other students. For the most part, well in terms of teachers, the only one I remember was a substitute teacher that would come in once in a while. He was very Aboriginal and very open about it. First off he looked Aboriginal which was beneficial and he was just not shy about his culture at all. This was good. It was definitely the first time I experienced anything like that in high school.

Now in terms of kids, it frustrates me that money seems to come up quite a bit with the blood. As a university student, I have to worry about feeding myself and covering books and covering as much tuition as I can. So scholarships have been a wonderful, wonderful thing. Whenever I talked to anybody about being scared about not getting a scholarship or when I tried to figure out where I was going to live, that was terrifying. A lot of what I got was, "You're Métis, why don't you get money for it?" When people think of being Aboriginal or being Métis they think of the blood, not so much the culture and they talk about the money you can get for your blood. Nobody asks about the culture. Nobody asks if I do any of that, if I fast or know the story behind a dream catcher or have smudges or any of that. They just ask if I can get money for school. And when I say no, they ask why not and I say because I don't ask for it. I don't know, because I, I don't know if I can or not. I haven't looked into it. I don't want to depend on my blood for financial assistance given that I haven't been the most faithful Métis person. It took me 17 years to finally be like, "Hey I am Aboriginal. Stop insulting them." You know for the most part I was quiet and just like, "Nope, I don't look Native. I swear I'm not."

My advice to teachers working with Aboriginal students is to try to avoid the clichés. I got pretty sick of very white looking people telling me, "Look—dream catchers!" I understand that a dream catcher is a big symbol of Aboriginality but I got pretty sick of looking at them. It's such an obvious symbol. So being in my early teens and trying to ignore that portion of my life and having the same damn dream catcher thrown in my face all the time, it's like really, this is all it's about, it's about the dream catcher on TV? That's great, I don't care. I'm busy. Bye! So, I don't know, I just feel like if Aboriginal content ever came up in class, it was always about the same things, the same stories. It just all seemed very superficial. If they could find something that was actually unique and not as worn out, not as obvious, it might make it more interesting.

I mean it didn't have much of a role in my education up until my professor asked me to do a presentation. The only person I really had pushing it was my mother and I was very good at pushing her away. She's very strongly Native and very strongly involved in

education. She's always been like that and whenever I'm nervous writing about something in school, she's always been like, "Oh hey look, make it Native."

Having a professor ask me to learn and talk about Native experiences and not giving me any restrictions at all just saying, "I'm going to go into this unit on residential schools so it would be good if you could like talk about some stuff for an hour, you know whatever." Obviously he didn't say it like that but nobody had ever approached me and my Aboriginality in that way before. To ask me about it and to give me time to prepare as well was good. If he had just said, "Let's just do a chat about it," I would have had nothing to say. I would have said, "It's 6 o'clock. I've got to go home." You know, just having somebody ask me about it and ask me to share what I could find about it and to share what I wanted to share about in any way that I wanted to, was very liberating. When he asked me to talk about Aboriginal issues and stuff like that, I felt like that was really a turning point, being able to force all those other students to participate in my culture, to sit around in a circle and listen to me talk. I felt that was like my first real positive push towards being Métis and sharing that with other people. It made me start identifying with it and learning more about it and looking at going to university.

RICK

> Rick is a 30 year old male graduate of Seven Oaks School Division. He is currently living in a northern Manitoba community working as a residential school counsellor for a Tribal Council.

My name is Rick and I am 30 years old, married with one son and we're living up North right now. I'm a residential school counsellor which basically means I service youth and work with survivors. I do a lot of facilitating in group settings, one-on-one settings and yeah, that keeps me pretty busy right now. I've worked in high schools. I've worked in schools since high school in many different fields and I just found out a few years ago that this is what I want to do, that I want to help people. Therefore, I got this job now and I'm really enjoying it. It keeps me busy but it keeps me away from home too. You know, that's the flipside of everything else. Keeps me away from my wife and son so it's always hard—it is really hard!

I grew up in a small Manitoba reserve probably about less than a thousand people on the reserve. In my graduating class, Grade 9, there were 11 of us. When I was ready to enter high school I made the choice to go to Cranberry Portage. I was living in a residence there which wasn't for me. That's when I ventured out to Winnipeg. It was really scary, being only 14 and being here by myself. I remember my first day of school; I didn't want to go I was so scared. I was, you know, I had genuine fear inside of me. And I was no longer the smartest in school anymore. I was just a regular person now and the school was huge compared to my school at home, something I hadn't seen before. So it was tough, it was really tough the first day or two to just go to school.

At the beginning it was really, really tough. It wasn't so tough being Aboriginal, it was tough trying to fit in … like me being one of five or six noticeable Indians in school; it was oh so tough. And the thing is, those people never ever talked to me, those other Native people that I knew were Indians, they never talked or hung out together. You know, I found it very awkward trying to talk with them 'cause they were very, very—you know, "Oh this guy is not an Indian." It really baffled me.

I finally met someone who became my best friend there. He's a Filipino and was an older student and he and I got together and it seemed like I fit in with the Filipino people you know. Yeah, they were my really close friends, my group of people—Marco and Vincent and Ben and Steve. We hung out constantly. We were having pizza at my place one afternoon and my Dad was on his way out and we saw him go out and he starts speaking to me in Cree. So, I answered him back and the guys were all looking at me. All my white friends were looking at me.

"What language is that Rick?"

"Oh, it's Cree."

"You're Native?"

My buddy Marco was just killing himself. He knew I was Native and said, "You're an Indian?"

"Yeah, I'm Indian. Why?"

"I thought you were Filipino."

"Well, why would you think that?"

"Well, you've got the hair, you talk like us."

Actually I was picking up the Filipino dialect. I was picking up the language because my best friends were all Filipino. And yeah they all thought I was Filipino and my closest friend, my closest group of friends kept teasing, "No way Rick. You're not."

"Yeah, I'm Indian. Ask my Dad when he gets back here," I said. "Ask Marco. Marco knows."

Marco was killing himself laughing on the couch. And yeah, they could not believe that I was Indian. So I asked, "What else, you know, why else do you think I'm Filipino?" They answered, "Why do you play basketball like a Filipino?" That blew me, like how do you play basketball like a Filipino? With an accent, I guess.

I don't know. What do I do that makes me look Filipino? For years, they thought I was a Filipino. It never dawned on them that I was Native. I don't know if it was because I was always with them, the Filipino people in my school. It was predominantly Filipino and/or white in the school at the time. Anyways, I had lots of friends. But I was with the Filipinos sitting out front sitting on the grass, reading a book, doing homework, smoking and you know that's who I was with, it was my group of people. Always with the Filipinos and that's where you'd find me. So, everybody always thought I was Filipino. There were a lot of people that didn't even know I was Native.

All my friends were a big part of me going to school. Because of them I always looked forward to going. I can't really remember skipping out of a whole lot of classes. Like I knew I missed class but I think skipping class was all in my head because I had legitimate reasons. I can't remember just cutting class for the hell of it. I enjoyed going to class, I loved to socialize with my friends, right? I loved being with my friends, my group of friends. Studying and all wasn't that important to me; I could remember the work. But it was to my friends. It was like they needed to be in that library two hours a day studying with a staff monitor and they were just barely making it. Here I am, I never ever studied anyway and still I'm getting B's and then I started studying and noticed my marks started to improve. You know just passing school had been enough for me. I never achieved an A, an honour student or anything else. As long as my mark was over 50, it was good enough for me. I never put any extra effort into anything so that was a big achievement I guess. That was a big achievement. I was only the third person in my family to graduate

high school. I have an uncle and an aunt that graduated and that's it out of my whole entire family. Could tell you it forced me in to finish.

First thing in the morning was my favourite part of school. I would get to school and see my friends all over like meeting new people every day. Yeah, the hallways were small you know—shaking hands with everybody on my way to class to a point where it was even with teachers. "Good morning, Rick." "Good morning, Rick." Going through the halls—and it was crowded. Like it was crowded with people, shaking hands, saying good morning and stuff. Yeah, it was probably my favourite part besides sports—I mean one of the physical education teachers kept us pretty busy. Even though when we weren't involved, she got us involved in it. She was very easy to talk to. During intramurals she participated with the students. I can remember her picking her own team for intramurals, you know playing with them. She was a phenomenal volleyball player and she was awesome. Yeah, we were playing against her and thought she was going to get it, you know? I come out, spike, hit the ball as hard as I can and there she is digging it out. I think, wow! She dug it out!

Yeah, and you know at that time it was unheard of for girls to play well. Girls and guys we played with each other a lot but volleyball was something else. A girl digging up a guy's spike was just not one of those things most women do—most would scatter when they see you up in the air, but there she was, she was hitting as hard as you can. She's taking it up—she's done it now. She played with her heart. She made it fun. She really did.

I have a lot of history, I can say now looking back at it. Like I told you my first day of school was very, very tough because I can remember sitting in the back seat of the car crying and I didn't want to go in. I was scared and I didn't like it. When I graduated at home in Grade 9 you know, I don't think I had a mark under 95 percent in anything. In high school that first year really knocks you down. You've got to understand I was just a normal person and I realized my education wasn't as advanced as everybody else's education. Um, I was um, there was a lot of things I didn't learn. Like coming to high school, I was very unprepared and I barely got through my Grade 10 year with a 31-32 percent—like that was the best I could do. I'm just a normal person.

I went back to the reserve after the first term and my friends asked me, "How was it?" "Whoa, it's tough—yeah." The majority of my peers I had graduated with in Grade 9 they had dropped out of school already at that point and well, I asked, "Why should you guys quit?" Well, I didn't quit, I didn't quit because I remember people in my head telling me not to; like I asked teachers for help to get where I was—one teacher in particular, Mr. P. I could thank him for my success in school. He lives in Winnipeg now and teaches in the core area. I remember his voice in my head kept telling me to "keep going." Walk through it, just go, just go. Don't get stuck. Keep moving forward. If you don't know it Rick, don't do it. Just keep going. Don't stop it, put that behind you. Just do what you can do and you can always come back to it." I'll always remember his voice in my head talking me out. I remember one day in high school when I was so frustrated sitting and crying and could feel myself crying from the feeling of being overwhelmed

and I thought back and like all I can hear is Mr. P.'s voice say, "You're okay, keep going, keep going forward."

I remember quite a few of my teachers in high school. Mr. M. was a character I'll never ever forget. You know, it was like,

"Rick?"

"What?"

"Did you hand in your homework?"

"No, I didn't hand it, I just got here man."

"Aha!"

I wasn't late for class. I had broken my arm in the summer and I didn't come back right away, so I was two weeks late for school. He was hilarious, a good teacher but a character! I'll never forget him.

There was another teacher I had that I didn't like. She called me by my older brother's name for a year. I don't know what I did to her but I remember getting kicked out of the classroom. I walked into class late probably about 10 minutes, 15 minutes at the most. I walked in, closed the door. She was teaching. I closed the door quietly behind me so you couldn't hear the click. She looked at me and right away she had that look on her face and I knew. I sat down and opened my books to the page number on the board. I opened up my book. "Peter—get out of here!" Then I closed my books and I didn't know why I got kicked out of class. "Don't come back here until you see the vice principal." Well that's a great excuse not to come to class.

Everyday, she never knew my name, called me Peter; she kicked me out of class for a reason that in all honesty was not fair to me. I knew I didn't do anything besides being late and she kicked me out of there, suspended, on the verge of my credit being suspended. I thought it was very, very unfair and I was very angry at her.

I also had teachers like Mr. W., a new teacher at the time in Seven Oaks. Years later he remembered me at a conference. I was at a conference here, the *Walking in Both Worlds Conference* for Aboriginal teachers and he remembered me. I remember seeing him up on top of the stairs at the Convention Centre, as my wife was pregnant at the time. "Man, that guy's my old high school teacher," I told my wife, "bright as day." He looked at me and he recognized me. He was coming down waving at me. And he got off the escalator and came over towards me.

"Rick," he says.

"Mr. W.!"

"It's Fred, you know, we're colleagues now. We're colleagues now, and you're no longer my student."

We talked. I can't remember what he's doing now, though. He was really good to me my first year in high school. I'll never forget him. His teaching was very hands on and he always made things understandable. He was a young teacher at the time and it may have been his first couple years out of university, but just his humour in class made going to computer class fun. I didn't pass his course. I remember failing, but I went to his class even though I failed. And I took his class over again and I passed it. It was that enjoyable, even though I failed, it was that enjoyable that I wanted to go back to his class. I wanted to be there. And then there were other teachers I remember too. I remember what they wore, and some of the things they used to do outside of class.

Teachers who helped? I can remember three or four who did. A few years back I stopped in for a visit and I saw the vice principal and my art teacher. She's the reason I enjoyed art class. She inspired me to do art. I learned a lot from her class; it wasn't just about artwork it was about the history of art and some of that other stuff—it was really good. I'm still trying to think of my history teacher's name. He always took the time if I needed to talk. He was always there to talk to. He was kind and explained what he first knew about life. Yes, he pointed out some of my downfalls and how I could improve myself as a student and I passed every one of his courses. He told us that there's always room for improvement, there's always a way to get improvement so even during my spares if he was on a break and I knew that he was in his room, I would knock on his door and go sit there and just listen to him. He would talk and I think he was taking university courses at the time and I remember he was in his late 40s, early 50s and him going to school and teaching at the same time.

What do I think they could have done better as teachers? Read, learn different styles of teaching. I myself never got a whole lot of that. I enjoy things being read to me, I learn by listening and by seeing basically. A lot of hands on stuff and teachers should open their minds and realize there's more than one way of learning all kinds of things. Please do it. Find, use the different kinds of styles of teaching for people who don't just learn by listening to a voice, use hand gestures a lot more. Use something so a person can see what you're doing, hear what you're doing, feel things, different things. Learn to help them understand, to learn a lot better.

I find a lot of teachers are so closed minded about using different learning styles because of the ways they were taught. They will dictate a lot of things then write it out and get us to copy as they write this on the board. But if teachers incorporated all the different styles for people who learn differently they'll find lots of success in changing it up. Do whatever needs to be done. I work with teachers every day. If they could do that they would keep a lot more kids in school, keep a lot more kids out of trouble.

The thing I liked about my school was that there was a multi-denomination of people there. You know, immigrants, Jewish people, white people, Filipinos, the Aboriginal people. I liked the fact that it seemed like one big group of people together and no one

was fighting. There was no racism involved in anything. It was great. I really enjoyed it there and made a lot of friends as the years went on. I found just recently on Facebook that people I know are still out there. There's a guy that I went to high school with. He was one of the first people that actually came up to me and said hi. A white guy and he and I are still friends to this day. He's living out in Calgary. He does Iron Man Training out there. He is one of the people that I still keep in contact with.

I still keep in contact with my Filipino friends but the person I don't keep in contact with is my best friend. I know he lives here. I don't know what really happened or why. I think it was because he started going out with my girlfriend—my girlfriend of almost four years, five years. But he kind of, when he told me about it was you know, "I know why you love her man." Yes. Not a good scene at the time. I was very angry but I didn't hit him because I know he didn't fight you know. I think she was better off with him than me.

I can never recall much being said about my being Aboriginal at school. I think the teachers treated everyone the same. There was one teacher who knew for sure that we were Aboriginal. He knew my Dad, like he and my Dad would talk quite often. He was the guy who dealt with Frontier School Division because they were the ones sponsoring me.

I don't think that any Aboriginal perspectives were taught. Not that I know of. I can't recall ever experiencing that. I know in our class we did a thing on Native Art Work and stuff like that. I remember a couple of Native guys that were in my art class that were really good artists. And I don't mean just Native Art—they were great at comic books and art in general. So, they were really, really good artists but I don't remember any history being taught though. That was about it. Maybe I came to school at the right time. I never got a whole lot of racism ever. I was treated like a person from everyone. I don't ever recall hearing a racial slur of any kind towards me in that school. I know that some people, most people, knew I was Aboriginal. They respected that.

They had a lot of questions. I remember having to field a whole bunch of questions on ceremonies and stuff like that which I didn't know about because it was never ever practiced in my family and in my community. I couldn't answer them and they'd say you know, "What kind of Indian are you Rick?" Like I'm supposed to know everything about Aboriginal culture and I didn't. Anyway, when those questions are asked you feel, "How come I don't know this?" In my family I mean we never learned those kinds of things. I'm just learning it for the first time today. When I didn't know the answers I felt stupid towards myself, but I just never knew because it was never ever practiced in my family, the traditions and stuff. Now I could tell them about them. I teach them now. I share lots with students. I said I went to high school and I never ever stopped reading books. I've never left school.

I'm not sure if my culture played a role in high school or not. I'm really not sure. I know nobody's culture seemed like a huge issue at the time. It seemed like everybody was treated equally. My advice to teachers and students is to be open-minded and take your

time. I hope things do change for the better. Hey, they are pretty good now. Everywhere it's better. I hope my story goes to students out there. That yeah, it's hard but you have to push through it, really push through it. With the help of teachers, with the help of your friends you get through.

I remember almost quitting the May of my graduating year. The end of May I had lost a cousin. He got shot in the head. The thing is I was with him about an hour, hour and a half, before he got killed. My younger cousin and I were with him that day. My uncles said, "Look out for him and make sure he's okay," and we were with him that day and I got home to where I was living in Garden City and my Dad called me. I was living with my new house parents. My Dad figured he would call me before we heard on the news. "Your cousin V. got killed tonight."

"I was just with him, not even an hour ago. What happened?" I knew, I just knew he was a gang member.

"His buddies came over and they were playing with a shot gun. It was loaded or something like that and he was shot in the face."

I remember going to school the next day and friends were talking about it. They showed me a newspaper and I said, "Yeah, I know that guy." I told them a close cousin of mine was killed. Right away they realized I was serious and came over and gave me a hug and stuff. I remember being at the lockers. One of them came over and asked me for a cigarette and I told him I didn't have any.

"Just one for later on today," he said, "Come on Rick, give me a cigarette. Find them. Come on Rick quit being an idiot."

I said, "What did you just call me?"

"Being an idiot—give me a cigarette."

"Screw you, you're an idiot." Then I grabbed him and pushed him into the locker.

A few friends of my mine ushered him away from me. The Principal was in the hallway and I remember him coming after me and saying, "You know, you're going to get yourself expelled, Rick".

I said, "Whatever. Take me to the office."

I was angry very, very angered to lip off like that to someone in power—never done that before. Then the school counsellor came. They asked me what had happened but I didn't want to tell them. I never trusted them. I never did. I never wanted anyone but my best friends. Then they called my home placement counsellor.

As soon as I saw him walk through the doors I put my head down. I thought I was going to vomit. "Why am I upset, why am I so angry? What have I done?" He said, "Come on Rick," and we went out for lunch. He reamed me out for losing it especially so late in the year. He was my Grades 10-12 counsellor. He was the guy I called when I needed help sometimes at 2 o'clock in the morning. He was always there for me. If I needed something, this guy—that was him. You know he really made a lot of sense. What he told me always made me realize there were some times when I was wrong. I'd get really upset about something but it may have been my fault. I think I overreacted to things. I needed someone to explain that to me, to help me be calm and to wait, to have me understand that it may have been my fault. I'd think it over and then I'd be apologizing the next day. "It's my fault. I was the one wrong here you know." He helped me understand and how to monitor things. Something I'll never forget.

It was tough; it was really tough at the beginning. Especially being 14 and being away from home. It really, really made me grow up in a hurry. I had to become an adult at 14. I had to wake myself up in the mornings, make sure that I was at school, and make sure that my homework and all was done. You know my family's really never ever been rich so I only got home to see my family at Christmas time and in the summer time. I got to see them twice a year. And it was tough.

As a counsellor I see students come from all over the place and I've seen so many get homesick. I talk about my experiences and listen to theirs and they open up a bit knowing they aren't alone. They say that teachers pick on them, that teachers are racists. They blow it out of proportion. I don't think that the teachers are racist. I think they are green around the ears, but who isn't coming from their last year of university. They are just beginning. We could find a spot for them—my old high school! I made a lot of good friends there and had a lot of fun.

JASON

> Jason, who is currently 28 years old, attended school in Seven Oaks School Division from Kindergarten to Grade 12. After high school graduation he completed 2 years at the University of Winnipeg and then registered at Red River College where he earned his commercial pilot's license. He also has experience working with children and youth through Child and Family Services.

I grew up in Seven Oaks School Division but since my dad is from Grand Rapids and my mom from Matheson Island, I had that small town, small community kind of mentality. I spent a lot of time out there, weekends and all the summers, but to my family I'm a city boy. Now that I've learned more about myself, I realize that living in a small town and a small community just never was for me. So they were right. I'm a city guy and I'll always live in the city.

After high school and leaving the University of Winnipeg, I went into the Red River College Aviation Management Program and I got my commercial pilot's license and all the applicable ratings. I worked as a pilot for four years—in Ontario for a year, Matheson Island for a year, and Winnipeg for a couple of years. I've flown all over the country from the Yukon to Newfoundland. I didn't want to continue doing that for the rest of my life. You know what I mean? It was experience; I love flying. I loved doing what I did, but I just felt like I had a lot more to offer working with youth, working with kids, so that's why I'm now trying to go to school to be a high school teacher.

I started courses at the University of Manitoba this year thinking that I was going to do the regular five year education program, but then I heard about an Aboriginal Teacher Education program and decided that's essentially what I want to do. The idea of being in a small class atmosphere working full time in schools and attending University classes part-time with other Aboriginal people sounds like a really good program for me.

What was it like for me going to school in Seven Oaks School Division? I guess since I don't really have anything else to compare it to, Seven Oaks School Division was just school to me. I mean my overall experience in school as an Aboriginal person was a positive one. If I did have any negative experiences I didn't consider them part of the School Division. I would have considered it part of the community I grew up in, you know, with other kids. As far as the School Division goes and the teachers and principals that I interacted with, it was always positive as far as being Aboriginal.

I tried my best to prepare myself for this interview before I came here because I knew a lot of these questions about my experiences in school as an Aboriginal person would come up. And the only thing that stuck out in my mind is positive experiences due to the fact that I was Aboriginal and my family is from a small community. I can't really explain it but knowing or thinking that someone is prejudiced just comes with experience. It might be judgmental or unfair to label people with this kind of assumption but some people have to do it for protection. It may be protection from someone who may hurt

them, say offensive things or just plain make them feel mad. Nobody wants to surround themselves with people that don't like them. I think that as part of a minority group, some people just learn to identify when someone is prejudiced and understand it might be a good idea to stay away. It's the little things people say, or the quick reactions to certain things and behaviours of people in general that give it away. Everybody on this planet has prejudices; knowing and understanding where they come from and trying hard to overlook them is the sign of a person who wants to work beyond them.

I remember one teacher from a large northern town where I lived. He was actually a white guy from this town which is a very, very divided community. Like there is the river and then you know black and white as far as crossing the bridge. He was from the white side of the community, if I can call it that, and all my family and a lot of my friends live on reserves. Talking to him you know I realized that he didn't have prejudice, none of those "little things." It was like, "Wow! This guy's not bad and he grew up in that town." That just shows that this person has the intelligence and consideration to understand what was going on around him.

Let's face it, most people in this world end up thinking and acting exactly like everyone around them. We'd talk about the town and restaurants there. He was one of my favourite teachers just because of that. He taught English and the fact that he didn't have those negative feelings towards Aboriginal people stood out because coming from there it's hard not to. Yeah, it just went to show how much effort he made to be different from everyone in that town.

Like I said before, I spent a lot of time in my parents' communities and just the fact that I had such a close family, not just immediate family, but cousins, and aunties and uncles, made me proud of who I am. We were all proud to be who we are. It's just the way our family raised us and I think that knowing we had that family support behind us just made us proud of our background. There is a lot of traditionalism in my dad's side of the family and also in my mom's side—Métis hunters, trappers, fishermen; that's just the lifestyle they come from, and I was always happy to go out there and spend a weekend. I was always telling my friends about it and they all just really seemed interested and so it just made me happier to be noticed.

What was my favourite part of school? I guess it changed over the years. My favourite part of elementary school was my friends and the fact that the school was close by. I didn't have to get out of bed until 8:30 a.m. since I had about a thirty second walk to school. I just remembered that today. You know all the kids were great. There were very few bad kids if you can call them that.

I was a bad kid in elementary school; I was bad in junior high. When I say I was bad, I mean I had an attitude and I talked back to teachers. I caused a lot of problems for them. But the fact that I was Aboriginal never really came up and I'm sure it was hard because everyone knew that I was. I'm not your stereotypical long haired, brown skinned, accent kind of Aboriginal person. Everybody knew that I was Aboriginal because I am proud of it and I told everybody. I think maybe in a way that kind of intimidated people. At least,

that's the way I look at it now. And you know, I think that when people are proud of who they are and what they are then putting them down seems like a waste of time.

I can't really say that my experiences in middle school were all that good but when I got to high school I loved it. I just liked being there. A lot of my cousins from Matheson Island and Pine Dock went there so we just kind of stuck together. I always had the same group of friends until probably Grade 10 or 11. That's when I started hanging out with my cousins. There were four or five of us, four all the time, sometimes five, that hung out together. We became really close because they came here from communities where they didn't have a high school. Since they were from small towns, I was you know, kind of like their connection to the city and we just hung out all the time. Because I helped them out getting used to the city they would give me a ride on the weekends to Matheson Island. As time went on and they felt more comfortable around the people I would introduce them to, we all hung out and went to the same "functions." So high school was a great experience to me.

For extra-curricular involvement I played hockey, nothing else. I didn't even play floor hockey. I'd have to say I didn't just because I wasn't interested. I was never really into volleyball, basketball or badminton. I grew up a hockey player—my dad was a hockey player. I played community hockey until I was about 11 years old. Well actually, I always played the highest level that you could, so I started out playing community based hockey, and then I moved into AA and AAA levels and on to junior hockey. I played a pretty high level of hockey all the time. I didn't really have very many friends at hockey because that's where being Aboriginal kind of deterred that. I mean I don't want to sound stereotypical but most young hockey players don't really know the kind of family that Aboriginal people come from, what kind of values they have. I mean Aboriginal people don't really, you know, they don't really fit. So, there was always that young boy kind of clique, a little bit of racism happening there. And I could tell that, so I didn't really make a lot of hockey player buddies.

When I got into high school, I played high school hockey and that's when the racism really came out and that was when having a cousin who also played hockey was really beneficial because it was just the two of us all the time. We'd go to hockey games together, go to practice together and we really became close because the racism in the dressing room was bad sometimes and we'd have to stand up for each other. So having someone else there really helped sometimes, instead of having to stand up by yourself and just getting beaten down. You know, it helped to have two of us, plus we were the best fighters on the team, so ….

I have always been really aware of racism. Like I said, a lot of people at the school didn't know that I was Aboriginal until I told them. Most of the time I would have to tell people who I caught saying something racist. Like I would start swearing and asking, "What the hell does that mean?" They would respond, "Oh no, I mean not you—you're different." Oh, I hated that. I hated that comment. "I don't mean one like you; you're different." Well, no I'm not. You know just like having that education, having that experience all came from my family because they would talk about their experiences and

racism has been a problem for centuries. It still is. And just having the family there to explain to me situations that would come up and having the strength to stand up for myself was something that I'm fortunate to have had.

In high school everything about yourself is always in the back of your mind. I think it's hard or inaccurate to look at it specifically as "Aboriginal" identity instead of just plain "identity." High school is a tough place that seems to be focused almost entirely on status and identity among your peers. I'm Aboriginal, that's part of who I am. That's part of my identity. As a kid in high school it was something that I let everyone know—almost advertised—and was proud of. It was never something that was hard for me to be proud of either, so maybe that made it easier for me to let everyone know, just like for Punjabi kids, Jewish kids, girls, boys everyone with an identity, me being Aboriginal was part of that identity so it was always on my mind.

In terms of support from teachers, in addition to the one from the town near my reserve, I know there was a Native Studies teacher in my high school. She's a really good one and really involved in the Aboriginal community. She was really close to a lot of my cousins and had a huge influence on them. She didn't influence me; I don't think she would even know who I am. But just the fact that she influenced them so much, like they always talk how much they love her. They still go to see her once in a while. Like just, like having that there and just being able to notice it like that was an inspiration to me. They still go to see her once in a while.

As far as my personal experiences in school go, I can't really say that I've had a negative one or very many positive ones based on being Aboriginal. I mean, I was always a really quiet student. I didn't say much, just went to school, went home, called up the buddies, you know, went and played street hockey or something, maybe a bike ride. I was never really an outspoken student, didn't really express that I needed help with something because I always had a lot of support at home.

I guess I was always really good in school. I mean my mom's a very, very smart person. She's had an excellent career. She graduated from medicine when I was 5 or 6 years old. My dad was a commercial pilot, so I always had that, "Do your homework" thing. I guess they just were excellent parents and I was really a smart kid. But even now, going to university, I'm still lazy. Lazy doing homework. Right now, I've got a 10-page paper due on Tuesday. I've barely started it. But, I'm not worried about it, because I know I'll be able to squeeze by. Probably having a little bit of intelligence has made me a lazy person especially academically and homework studies wise, cause I always made it through school without doing homework although my marks in Grades 11 and 12 suffered because of it. That's why you need to apply yourself especially in university and I've been okay getting, you know, C's, B's. Really, with a little bit of effort, I could have had A's. I just always knew that.

When I was playing junior hockey I spent two years at the University of Winnipeg. So, I've got those under my belt. If I had known then, what I know now about the long range effect of poor marks, I would have smartened up. I didn't do any homework. I was on

the road a lot, traveling, playing hockey. I would have stayed home from a couple of practices, couple of games, if I had known that low marks on my transcript could cost me now.

When I took Grade 11 Chemistry I was competitive with another guy in that class. We would always tell each other, "Oh I'm going to beat you on the next test." I got a decent mark in it, an A or B only because you know, I wanted to be good, wanted to beat this guy. In Grade 12, I didn't want to take chemistry anymore since he wasn't in my class. We always talked about it, our chemistry class, you know, about the problems and the things we were having trouble with. And, I think a lot of success has to do with the bunch of friends you choose, like who you want to hang out with and being able to talk to them about homework and things. You'll notice there's something about being included when your classes get out. You can just walk up to somebody and say, "Hey I want to talk to you about this problem here. I have a question about something from class," or about something he or she is going over from class. Just to be able to do that you have to be open. And that's a problem for a lot of Aboriginal people. We're shy; it's hard for us to just walk up to people we've never met before and ask them about school. So many different things affect that shyness. It's hard to stop it.

See that's one of the big reasons why I want to become a teacher. A lot of people are trying to push me over to social work cause that's what I do part-time right now. I work with youth. I've done a lot of respite work and they all want me to go into social work, but I don't want to do that. I want to go into education, because I want to be able to help the kids that want to help themselves. I've seen so much of it working for CFS. I hate to say it, but some kids almost can't be helped. You know what I mean? In an education setting, classroom setting, I feel I have confidence that I'll see those students that need that bit of extra push, that little bit of extra help. I'll be able to see that easily. I'll be able to recognize right away what kind of background they come from, what they're going to need help in. Things like that. Aboriginal kids especially. That's what I want to do.

In terms of my own experience one school incident actually stands out. It was an art class or something. We were making dream catchers and I wasn't even doing that good a job. I've seen a thousand of them. Everybody's seen a thousand of them and I was like making one. I guess this one guy felt like mine was better than his and he kept saying things like, "Oh, well don't show us up you know. You're making us look bad," or something like that, and it was just ridiculous. I wasn't even doing a good job. I felt like just because I was Aboriginal everybody assumed that I knew what I was doing and I've made a thousand of these in my lifetime but like I don't even have one. I don't buy dream catchers. I don't have one. I don't think they're that nice.

There's so many stereotypes coming into school and there's so much pressure on non-Aboriginal people when they're around Aboriginal people about being racist and about not being racist that it kind of clouds their vision a lot. I try so hard not to be racist when I'm around non-Aboriginal people, but I think it's just a human reaction. As far as

experiences go in school, I can't really think of any more right now, positive anyways or really negative. I don't think in the negative.

Were Aboriginal perspectives brought into the curriculum? When did I go to school, late 80s-early 90s? Back then, no. Let's face it; it's only come into the education system in the last few years. There was never Native Studies like that when my brother was in school. There was in high school but I don't remember ever seeing videos or anything like that in elementary or in junior high even. So maybe, maybe I got lucky. Maybe this interview should happen in about 10 years when students who are in elementary and junior high now watching these videos leave school, because I never got to see any of them. Least I don't remember. But I know for sure about the feeling I would have had so maybe I didn't see any. It's a kind of nervous feeling when you sit there and you're waiting, you're just waiting for comments to start and you're waiting for that racism to start and it's almost like you start shaking and you start to sweat because you know that it is coming.

Showing those videos gives students the opportunity to learn about Aboriginal perspectives. But they've already been brought up in their homes, they've already been affected by their parents, so they already have their views on Aboriginal people and it's going to take a lot to change those. So when you're sitting there in class and you're watching those videos and you're an Aboriginal kid who grew upon a reserve or grew up in a Métis community, you're just waiting for the racism to start. You wonder who's going to turn around and ask you a question about it thinking you should know the answer. That's one thing that always kind of bugs me is when people think that because I'm Aboriginal I know how to put on a sharing circle. People think that I've been to a couple of sweats. I think that there was one sweat in my life. I enjoyed it but it's not like I make it a common thing to do. All I did then was play hockey and go to school. See, I get stuff like that, its so, like it's so blatant and you can't even fault them because I mean, let's face it they're trying but they just have no clue. They have no idea how. I don't want to use the word "ignorant" but basically that's what it is. They have no clue.

See, when I got into high school that's when I started hearing about Native Studies courses and now they're actually recognizing it. Even when I was in middle years there was never, never anything to do focusing on Aboriginal people or anything like that. Especially with differences and stuff like that, I think most of it, not all of it, I learned from my family and my supports from home. Going to school there was never an issue where teachers became involved because whenever there was an issue between students it was hidden from staff. Kids are smart—they know how to hide stuff like that from teachers. They know how to hide problems between each other, whether or not they're going to fight after school, what they're arguing about. Like it was something always addressed after school and I guess the school division didn't have much to do with it nor could they. I hate to sound like I think I was too smart for the teachers in the school division, but a lot of the stuff I did about problems in school was after 3:30 p.m.

What do I hope comes out of this project? I hope that that the diversity of Aboriginal people that you're interviewing is huge. I'm getting tired of being in the middle as far as

the spectrum goes. I hope that you get a lot of different views, a lot of different experiences, a lot more positive and negative experiences that I couldn't offer because I did not have any. I hope that learning this, learning about what we think, about what we're thinking, what's going through our heads in different situations that it teaches you to be able to speak up. You know, calling kids after class, saying, "You know, are you okay with this. How do you feel?" Because that's what a lot of Aboriginal students need is to be taken aside and asked. "Hey, how do you feel?" You know most of them are going to open up because most of them are just waterfalls waiting to happen—like waiting for the flood gates to open. Talking to kids helps—it encourages them to stay in school, 'cause by the time they get to high school, if they're not attending school regularly, they're not going to finish. I hope this project helps teachers to be able to help them stay.

LAURA

> Laura is a 23 year old Métis woman who grew up in White Lake where she attended school until the end of Grade 9 when her family moved to Winnipeg. She completed high school in Seven Oaks School Division. As a child, Laura spent most weekends visiting her mother's family in Fairford and still spends time with them on a regular basis. She currently works in an educational setting.

The transition from school in White Lake to high school in Seven Oaks School Division was not too difficult for Laura.

On the first day before classes started there was a Grade 9 orientation day. When I registered they gave me the option of attending the orientation because I was a new student even though I was going into Grade 10. I decided to go and I met girls that were in my same age group. We did activities all day together and from then on those girls were my friends.

The teachers at my high school were all very nice. Some were a little strict, but you know they wanted the best from you and they were really good. Like, I had Mr. S. I think he's retired now, but he was really strict and he kind of pushed you in a good way. There were a few Aboriginal students but not really any Aboriginal teachers. I think there was one at the time when I was there and she was a good teacher. She taught English and kind of integrated Aboriginal culture into that. We did *April Raintree*. There wasn't really much Aboriginal content in any other classes I had. I never took a Native Studies class. I think there was one but there were some options I wanted that conflicted with other classes.

I didn't do any extracurricular activities. I'm not a sports type of person. I didn't participate in sports before moving to Winnipeg and I got there at such a late age, I was already working at an after school job so it conflicted anyway. So I just didn't have the time to be involved in anything extracurricular. There wasn't a lot I didn't like at the school. I mean I pretty much enjoyed everything—everyone has their little cliques but it didn't really affect me at all.

I think sometimes there were a lot of worksheets involved in class. Not in all classes but in some classes more than others. You know, a "you just had to do it" kind of thing. In some classes, there was more student involvement with the teacher where you discussed things and I liked that a lot. We were more involved in the learning aspect, I guess, not just, "Here's the worksheet."

The teachers were helpful and so were my friends. I had some pretty smart friends, so they were a good support. I think there was a resource teacher and two counsellors but I never really took advantage of them. I had mostly friends help me, just working with friends, and teachers were always available. My parents were always there if I needed help with homework, or there to push me if I didn't want to wake up in the morning. So

were my friends. I don't think I had any special goals for the future—I just wanted to complete school.

A lot of my friends knew I was Aboriginal. I had tons of people over at the house all the time and we had Aboriginal art all over so they would know by seeing it. Or if the topic came up I would say, "you know I am Aboriginal." I'd mention it. My mom's a teacher too and my friends and I, we would always go help her where she taught. So a lot of people did know although my mother looks just like me but with curly black hair. Sometimes I'd go to her school with her. They'd have Pow Wows there in the evenings or days but I'd tend to not actually participate, just attend with her.

A lot of my friends didn't really know much about Aboriginal people before they met me. They had their own little stereotypical views that I kind of pointed out to them. But I didn't feel any different being an Aboriginal person at school—it's hard to explain—there's so many different cultures in every school that you don't really feel like you're kind of separated at all I guess. For me it wasn't any different from White Lake. I'm not like you know a visibly Aboriginal person. But I can't say that it wouldn't have been different for someone else. Surprisingly there weren't many Aboriginal students in my classes that I knew of. There were probably 20 visible or non-visible Aboriginal students out of the 80 or so in my classes. There were some we noticed in different classes and some worked more in the resource area with the resource teacher, one-on-one. They'd only be there for the morning but there was only a few that I saw regularly.

In terms of my Aboriginal identity being affirmed, Aboriginal culture was never really brought up in class—like we never really talked about that stuff in the classroom. It was brought up in one class, but wasn't really in-depth. It was kind of integrated in some of the books we read and stuff, but not really, because the kids wouldn't go with it so then we'd do something different. Where I work now, we have a cultural program with sweats being offered. I don't remember that kind of cultural aspect in my high school. I think the option to be part of an Aboriginal cultural program should be there but sometimes it should be required for everybody, not just for Aboriginal students to be involved in. If it was something like an English class where you know you'd have to go —or like an assembly with an Elder there to smudge so you know everyone can see it, or a Pow Wow to at least experience it, where you wouldn't have to be involved, but you'd have to go. There never were opportunities like that for everybody to attend.

SHANIA

> Shania is 23 years old and married with three children. She attended school in Seven Oaks School Division from Kindergarten to Grade 12. After graduation she earned a Health Care Aide Certificate at Red River College and worked for Child and Family Services. She is currently in an Aboriginal Teacher Training Program.

I wanted to be part of this project because I'm interested in just everything about Aboriginal culture and I'm really into my culture. You know when I was faced with racist comments in school or discrimination, I took it to an administrator, from there I went to Seven Oaks Board Meetings; I went to the Aboriginal Liaison. I took things further than you know just walking away silently. I always stood up for my culture. I don't look full Native you know, so a lot of racist comments didn't come directly to me but were in classrooms when we started talking about Aboriginal culture and how we came along. That's when I starting hearing children saying that Aboriginals are nothing but drunks and on welfare. You know the comments that you get, so when I saw this project I was really interested in this research.

Well in elementary I never really experienced any discrimination or racist comments in the school. They used to have an Aboriginal day where people of all races could come out and learn about the Aboriginal culture. They would have bannock and stews and so elementary school was pretty comfortable. In Grades 7 to 9 in junior high, I had a hard time with a few teachers. You know there was this one time I remember. It was in Grade 9 cause Grade 9 Math was the hardest math to get into. I kept asking the teacher for help over and over and she just straight out the last time told me, "I'm not your personal tutor and if your parents can't afford it, there are tutors for low income families." And right there, I was like, **"**What's that supposed to mean?" I was so upset, I went to the phone at the school and I called my mother and she indicated to me, "There are two options; you can walk away silently and leave it alone or you could take if further and go to the administrator."

At that time I took it to the administrator. I remember how I felt so raged and my hands were sweaty and my heart was pounding and I just kind of wanted to walk into the administrator's office. I didn't want to wait there or anything. But when I sat down with her, she understood where I was coming from and because I was so upset at that point she just told me to go home and she would speak to the individual. From there they had got me to go to Seven Oaks Board Meeting at St. Benedict's and just tell about my experience to the counsellors and Seven Oaks employees who attended and I guess it just got better from that—like Grade 9 just went smoother from there. I know she talked to the individual but I don't know how they dealt with it. But that specific teacher came and apologized to me and you know, from there on I just kind of left it at that because I knew I had made my point and stood up for myself.

Another altercation was in Grade 11 History. There was a student teacher in the classroom. The teacher had stepped out and the topic was Aboriginal history, how we

came about or we were the first people here and of course, I don't look Aboriginal so the student teacher just asked, "What's you guys' opinion on Aboriginal people?" And that's when some kids said, "They're nothing but drunks, and they're savages." And, you know just all these racist comments and right there again. I just sat there and waited till they were all done making their comments and I stood up and I said, "Excuse me. You know what? You guys may not know it, but I'm Aboriginal." And, I said, "I don't think it's right the way you guys are talking about us." You know, I was so outraged I walked out of the classroom again.

But, I did go back and I explained myself. I said, "You know, we were the first people here and you guys basically took our land away." I explained the whole residential school experience you know. That's where the alcohol and drug abuse cycle came from and was passed down. Again I went to that administrator and I know that student teacher was no longer in our classroom. And in other rooms from that point on he was never alone. The teacher always had to be in there. So again I stood up for myself and I wasn't going to back down and be ashamed of my culture because I'm very proud of who I am and where I come from.

Racism happens not only with Aboriginal people but the week before Spring Break we had an incident here where a girl brought her heritage food and she warmed it up in the microwave and it kind of you know smelled up the room and two boys walked in and said, "Yuck, what's that smell? That's gross." And that girl just closed her lunch and put her head down and started crying. I said you know what, "You don't be ashamed of who you are, or where you come from or what background you are. You open up your food and you eat, you're equal as everybody." The specific boys that were teasing her are boys who are also teased around here, so I just turned around and told them, "You know, think about how you guys feel when you're picked on," and they apologized and that was left at that.

But there are not only negative experiences in Seven Oaks School Division. I had very positive experiences, like the Aboriginal day I mentioned where they had bannock, stew and everybody would come out and see. They even had someone come out here and actually help the students build a teepee outside with real sticks and everything. I don't know if they still have it. I was part of the first and second annual Pow Wows. The Native Awareness class put them together. I was kind of the lead person to get people to come out and to get the volunteers and plan what we were going to do. I was kind of the head person because I wanted to make it more open for people to know about Aboriginal people and culture.

Now that my daughter is in elementary I've seen a whole lot of difference in the school division. Now they have like an Aboriginal Liaison person in almost every school or one that attends every school and my daughter is learning about Aboriginal culture in school already. She's only in Grade 1. She asked, "Mom, am I an Anishanaabe then?" Well yeah because she doesn't look Anishanaabe. So I'm finding that there are a lot of positive aspects for Aboriginal people in Seven Oaks School Division now.

I have two other children as well. There's one in a daycare and there's one at home with his Dad right now. I also have a foster child and I also have my younger sibling who's 14 and my husband's younger sibling who's the same age. They moved to Winnipeg to attend school because their community schools were just not as great. They're about a year and a half behind and you know they want to move forward. Like when my mom moved to Winnipeg from our Lake Manitoba First Nations community. She had graduated there but when she attended University of Winnipeg she was told she had to do Grade 11 and 12 over again. That was just shattering for her you know. She moved to Winnipeg by herself not with a group of other students from her community and she told me stories, where she remembers sitting underneath the University stairs crying by herself because she was having trouble in school and was all alone and had no one to relate to.

So I'm very grateful that now when kids leave their communities they are connected to a group, not isolated as an individual but just helped to fit in with a group of other students are who are also coming from their communities to go to school here. My brother-in-law, he's 14 and is in middle school. He just moved in February and he fits in at the school great. You know the first week there were some comments. He was listening to his Ipod and they asked him, "What are you listening to, Pow Wow music?" He just turned back and said, "Excuse me, you know, I listen to the exact same music as you." But he didn't let it bother him and that's the thing I told him, "Don't let it bother you, because if they know it gets to you, they're going to continue doing it. You go ahead and say what you want to say. They're going to just leave it alone after a while you know."

My mother was definitely a role model for me. My mother's a very strong individual, an outspoken person. She worked for the Aboriginal Residential School group. She sat down with the residential survivors and actually went over detail by detail the abuse they went through. And that was very difficult for her. Now she's a Health Director. She's also worked as a NIHB program officer. She was always a lead person in all the jobs she's had, but she's worked very hard to get there—really hard, yeah.

Well it's like I said I took the Native Awareness class in high school. I was so fond of that class, that by the time I got to Grade 11, I had already finished up the Grade 12 Native Awareness option because it's only half a credit for half a year. I really enjoyed that class because in the Native Awareness class we were able to explain through all the schools—like show our culture. Right now in my high school's office there's this big, big, about three foot, picture that we made and it has a big dream catcher and bear paws and you know that was just us as a group doing it. The administrators were so fond of it they wanted to hang it in the office. You know those are things we're proud of. It's still hanging there now. I went to the open house with my sister, and I was like, "I made that you know." I was just happy to say also we made star blankets. We actually had individuals come out and show us how to make star blankets in our Native Awareness class. Volunteers, just people we knew that we would ask to come to our class. We would even do things like show bannock making for the kids. I have been making bannock since I was 9 and so I actually showed the class how to make it. We brought in

dream catcher making. I think I was one of the first ones to bring actual sinew and rings and the leather to make dream catchers. I was the one who showed them how to do it.

I've mentioned my negative experiences; um I can't think of others. You know, those were the two where I was so outraged. There were other things—you know there was always some who, when I wore my hair in braids you know, they'd say "What are those for? Should I cut your braids off?" Like I said, I'd never back down. Now I'm remembering Grade 4 when I brought in my jingle dress and did a presentation for the whole school, Kindergarten to Grade 6 in the library. I had sweet grass and cedar in my jingle dress, all dressed up in my outfit and I did performances for each grade as they came into the library and just kind of spoke about the jingle dress—the colours, the sacred medicines. Ah, there's so much.

I really enjoyed school. There was no favourite thing. I just enjoyed attending school like my mom says. I don't know why. I just got up in the mornings on my own to go to school. I did my homework. She never had any problems with me going to school. I just enjoyed being at school and if anything were to come, you know what, I enjoyed meeting the challenges. Everyday was a new challenge, you know, to get through and I'm a challenging person so the more difficult I made it the more interesting it was for me, you know.

My mother, she was a very strong influence on me. Like I said, if I did have the down points of feeling discrimination or anything upsetting she always brought me back up again and said, you know, "Stand up for yourself. Don't walk away quietly. You know you have a voice; you have your opinion." She pushed me a lot because when I was in elementary I guess first grade, I was a very shy, quiet kid and around Grade 3 or 4 that's when I started coming out and not being ashamed of who I was. So right from there I shot out and just pushed forward and kept pushing everyday. Academically I just enjoyed school. I don't know.

My grades, they were B's and C's. I was never an A+ student. I was never right on top, but I was average, between B's and C's. I never really failed anything. You know I also had a child at a young age, at the age of 17, but that didn't stop me from going to school. I didn't graduate the year I was supposed to but I continued going to school until I graduated. When I did get pregnant it was the end of Grade 9. In Grade 10 I had my baby girl. The teachers were saying to me, "So, what are you going to do now? Be on welfare? You're not going to finish school." And that determined me to prove them wrong. "You know, I'm going to finish school when I'm supposed to. I'm going to continue school no matter what you guys think." I guess that's what motivated me there too. Once I had my baby, which was on a Thursday, I went right back to school Monday. I had her with me in the classrooms and the teachers had no problem with that. But they were very surprised that I continued my education and right after high school I went to Red River for my Health Care Aide Certificate. From there, I went into Social Work where I worked for two years but that got too difficult apprehending children and everything. So I have work experience behind me. Now I'm in an Aboriginal Teacher Training Program. I had to work really hard—in the Health Care Aide Program you

needed 80% or more to pass every test or task you did and I always got more than 80%. I never had to re-do a test so—the more expectation you have of me, the harder I'll try. The more I'll push.

There was just my one teacher that I went to for support. I envy her so much. She's the one that pushed me, even for the Teacher Training Program. I didn't want to become a teacher. I was "No, no, that's not for me," and she's like, "You need to be a teacher. You belong in a school." And no matter what problems I had she was there. She was there no matter what. I always went to her. Even if I had a low day and I was just feeling you know not all that great, she would bring me back up again and encourage me. Even if I failed to do something or I didn't get the mark I wanted, she would push me and I'd go try harder and move back up. I was really close with her and even talked to her on a personal level. She inspired me a lot and I still have her by my side.

Another thing that stands out in my memory is the heritage language class, which was also Tuesday and Thursday evenings. There would be the Ojibway class you know they offered different languages and there was an Ojibway class. I attended that for a little bit but I didn't continue going because I found that all they were doing on the board was writing down words and then we would write them in our paper and to know a language you need to be speaking it. You need to speak it fluently in class for children to pick up. My little girl, Sarah, is learning that way. My parents speak Ojibway fluently, she knows, she knows the words, like she'll say, "Kawin ni-wi-ni bahsee" which means "I'm not going to sleep." My parents taught her to use these words, so you know she'll learn the language. You need to have it around you fluently. With me my parents spoke it to me. I spoke it fluently up to about Grade 2 but people started laughing at me and teasing me because I pronounced it the wrong way or I wasn't speaking it properly. I was just in Grade 2, 7 or 8 years old, but like I said I was shy at that time and because they started laughing at me, I kind of lost using the language. So now my parents speak Ojibway to my children and I want them to continue. I keep telling my daughter, "No matter what don't be afraid to speak it." My daughter has a jingle dress and she's a dancer but she's ashamed to take it to school. She doesn't, she's actually scared to hear what they're going to say to her and I try and tell her not to think like that and to think positive and you know, not be ashamed of who she is or where she comes from.

I think all my experiences made me move a step forward or pushed me to work harder. Like I said when I got pregnant I didn't quit. When that teacher said, "I'm not your personal tutor and you know, if you're a low income family go elsewhere whatever," I just thought, "No, I'm not going to go elsewhere. I'm your problem, and you're going to deal with me you know. You're my teacher, you're going to." So I guess standing up for myself motivated me the most to be successful. I won't back down if something's said to me I don't beat around the bush. I think just being a straight up person and pushing forward is why I'm where I am today. You know my administrator always says that to me, "You never back down, do you?" I want more, I push further, and that's how I achieved what I have.

As a student what would I like to say to teachers? Communication, I think … communication between a teacher and a student or a student and students, students and administrators, students and counsellors is the most important thing. If you have a problem or some comment you want to make you know you can say it. Be straight forward, don't beat around the bush or if you're angry at something don't be mean to me or take it out on me. Let me know what I've done wrong, you know. The same goes for students. Let the teacher know if you have a problem. If they don't want to help you, keep pushing, you know what I mean. Go to another teacher or go to the administrator. Don't just sit there and be quiet if they won't help you because that's just going to push you further and further back. I know that a lot of Aboriginal people, when they get rejected the first time, like someone says "no," or something like that, they back away and they kind of just leave it at that. They need to learn to push forward, keep asking, don't take "no" as an answer. If you need help get it. Communication, I would say is very important.

It's hard for Aboriginal people—they get quiet. See that's where it goes back to residential schools because of you know, sexual abuse, the physical abuse, the emotional abuse. Back in residential schools they wanted to make all the Aboriginal kids white kids. They cut their braids off; they weren't allowed to speak their language. They had to learn the Christian way in the churches back then but because all the kids could speak was Ojibway, Saulteaux or Cree they couldn't actually speak back. They were actually just quiet because they couldn't understand English until the nuns and the priests made them sit down and speak English. So now, like they say, it's a cycle that's just getting passed on and on and now I say to my generation, we need to break that cycle. You need to be more vocal, you need to push forward because, yes, I know a lot of Aboriginal people once they get rejected, they just back away or they just sit there quietly. They don't push forward or push for what they want, they just let it be, you know.

If a student is really quiet the teacher shouldn't just ignore them. Let me try to give you an example. Just say you had a child that was sitting in your classroom and didn't want to do the work. Maybe go up to them and see if they need help or if they're having problems understanding what they're supposed to do or if they're having trouble actually doing what they're supposed to be doing. Like they may not even understand; they may not even know how to read. They may not you know. But there is a point where if they're not going to communicate with you at all, then because you have a classroom of 26 kids, you can't be focused on that one individual the whole time, then I'd say after a certain amount of time, then just let them be and then maybe they'll come around. If not, they may have problems, like background problems. I never sit back there and let things go by. And with my daughter, I never just let her sit there. If she has a problem she comes home and tells me. I'll write a letter to the teacher in the agenda book or just a letter in her lunch bag to give to her teacher, you know, "Sarah is having problems doing this," just so she'll work with her a little bit.

At the beginning of the year, my daughter didn't want to go to school. We never found out why, but she'd cry every morning about going to school, so that's what I did. I went in and spoke to her teacher around 8 o'clock in the morning and I just said, "I'm not too

sure what the problem is, is she having problems at school?" And you know the teacher didn't see anything, my daughter was flying through her work. They didn't see what could be the problem. Over time, the teacher asked her to stay in maybe one recess and asked her, "Can you do this for me Sarah, like maybe clean up or do the recycling bin?" And at that time she would talk to my daughter and use that one-on-one time to see what was going on because I know she can't deal with her one-on-one in the classroom right because there's 26 other students. You know my daughter eventually came around. The problem was just because she was away from me, in Grade 1, a full day at school and so she just had to come around and that's how we figured out what her problem was. So, like I said, just keep pushing. Yeah, just keep pushing, you know maybe let it go for a little bit, but continue it on the next day or the next period or something, you know, just keep on them. Don't just let them slide out and be on their own, because that's just going to make them further and further behind.

I think what I have said and done has helped to improve what happens in those teacher's classrooms. I would also advise teachers to learn history just to know what they're teaching and leave it open—because it's an Aboriginal culture they're not all the same, you know, they not all like cedar or sweet grass. It isn't the same for everybody. There's not just one culture to learn about for Aboriginal people, there's the Inuit, the Métis, the Cree, the Ojibway, the Saulteaux. There are so many that you can learn from. If you google Indians or Aboriginal People you're going to get a bunch of stuff. You need to learn about exactly what you're going to teach. Like if you're going to teach about the Micmac, you know, you've got to learn about them. If the topic is the Iroquois you've got to learn about their specific background and that culture itself. Don't put us all in the same group because that's not how it works.

I'm very proud to be Aboriginal, proud of myself and my family and my kids. I enjoyed growing up. There were a few altercations that I had but also I had a lot of positive outcomes. Like going to the Seven Oaks Board meetings and letting other teachers hear my experiences made them watch how they taught. You know what I mean? It kind of opened their eyes to what to watch out for. I haven't heard of too many experiences of racism after that because, like I don't know, my mom and my administrator always tell me that I've made a big difference in the Seven Oaks School Division. Aboriginal heritage is more acknowledged and visible, there is more Aboriginal teaching, there's more understanding of the Aboriginal culture to be seen now in the school division.

I can't really say that my identity as an Aboriginal was affirmed a lot in school. It was fairly good. It was okay, like it was fairly even, like it wasn't awful. It was just that altercation in Grade 11 when I had that student teacher, but otherwise teachers you know asked me to bring my Aboriginal culture to the classroom. You know, "Can you bring your jingle dress?" Even in my cooking class, "You want to make bannock for the class? Do you want to show them how to make bannock?" I enjoyed doing that and sharing my culture and you know letting people know how it is.

Teachers did bring in different perspectives after a certain point. I think after Grade 9 or 10 teachers had heard about me. Like I won't back down or if they had a problem or if I

had a problem about racism, you know anything like that, they kind of knew to watch out for how they put it, or which way they taught it because they knew I wasn't going to just sit there. If they said it the wrong way, even if they were in the middle of teaching—how can I give an example, if they said, "The white people were here first," I would say, "Could I correct you on that? It was Aboriginal people first." You know, like if they didn't teach it right, I would correct them on that so, I think after so many years that teachers kind of learned to watch out for me because I always made them do it better or clearer to give more of an understanding to the other children.

The other day I was sitting at Tim Horton's having coffee and I heard this lady beside me talking and she said, "Oh, all these Indians are getting residential school money, and they're getting it for nothing—they weren't abused." And you know, right there I thought, okay you need to learn, you need to know, you need more knowledge of this, but I wasn't going to say, "Excuse me" and sit down with her and have an hour conversation on it. So I kind of just let it slide but I know that's still out there, still what they're thinking. I was just reading in the Grassroots paper yesterday that most people don't understand about residential schools. The article said Moonya, Moonya people, meaning white people, just think of settlement payments being paid out. They don't realize what the people went through. There were a lot of people that went away, who got taken from their parents and died at residential school and their parents never saw them again and the parent has to live with that. You know there are bodies out there, buried, that we've never even identified because of them being taken away. I just want them to know the whole background, want them to know more clearly, exactly what happened and why we have Aboriginal people in the streets that are living on welfare. I want them to recognize that welfare is not just specifically for Aboriginal people. It's for low income families that need help, you know, there's Filipino, Chinese and white people on Social Assistance. It's not just Aboriginal people. I want it to be much clearer where we're coming from.

I think that there still needs to be a better understanding of Aboriginal people—of how much and how far we've come from back then. I could say I have achieved a lot more than what many people were able to do in the past. Like my mom; my mother broke that cycle of the abuse. She was physically abused, sexually abused but she made sure that I didn't go through that and now I am making sure my kids get protected from that happening. You know we are breaking that cycle of abuse and building up to be stronger people.

I don't know what will come out of this research project. That's a tough one, eh? You know I hope it's just for people to listen to or to read. I don't know how it's going to be—hopefully we'll see what the experiences were and what has changed and what hasn't and what we can keep working on it. I haven't been in all the schools in Seven Oaks School Division. I still see some discrimination and racism like in the school where I'm now placed. I'm in a middle years classroom and at middle school age kids are more vocal and you know they can be rude. They kind of just say what they want to say.

I know that in one school they have a big Aboriginal mural of an eagle and they brought in the Métis Federation to come do some square dancing and jigging and you know that's the Métis way. I would just like to see it expand to all schools and people to learn about, know about Aboriginal cultures and that we're just like everybody else. Don't put us out as welfare bums. Learn about us—we're all as equal as everybody else.

Within the Narratives

> Just don't say in the years to come that you would have lived *your* life differently if only you had this story.
>
> You've heard it now. (King, 2003, p. 167)

The narratives of Carol, Karla, Rick, Jason, Laura and Shania have served to personalize the experiences of each individual. Each one is a journey shaped by their contexts, encounters, perspectives and values.

> The stories we hear and the stories we tell shape the meaning and the texture of our lives at every juncture.
>
> Stories and narrative, whether personal or fictional, provide meaning and belonging in our lives. They attach us to others and to our own histories by providing a tapestry rich with threads of time, place, character, and even advice on what we might do with our lives. The story fabric offers us images, myths, and metaphors that are morally resonant and contribute both to our knowing and our being known. (Witherell & Noddings, 1991, p. 1)

In this section we look at these narratives with the following questions in mind: How do the stories draw our attention to the relationship between contextual factors, systemic conditions and the success of Aboriginal students in schools? As a committee we examined the many, and often conflicting, understandings of the meaning of "success." We recognized that the question of "What counts as success?" remains a contestable notion. In the context of our system we made a decision to connect success with schooling achievement and graduation. What follows is our attempt to understand the significance and implications of these stories.

A Strong Sense of Family and Cultural Identity

Canadians, and educators in particular, have a responsibility to be knowledgeable about the history of Aboriginal peoples and the impact of history upon the current circumstances of Aboriginal families. An understanding and respect for the cultural landscape of the students' day to day experiences (van Ingen & Halas, 2006), along with an authentic belief in Aboriginal students as capable and successful learners (Gloria Ladson-Billings, 2001; Howard, 2003) contribute positively to the education of students.

> The tendency in the earlier literature on indigenous education, most of which was written from a non-indigenous perspective, was to focus on how to get Native people to acquire the appurtenances of the Western/scientific view of the world. Until recently there was very little literature that addressed how to get Western educators to understand Native world-views and ways of knowing as constituting knowledge systems in their own right, and even less on what it means for participants when such divergent systems coexist in the same person, organization, or community. It is imperative, therefore, that we come at these issues on a two-way street, rather than view them as a one-way challenge to get Native people to buy into the Western system. Native people may need to understand Western society, but not at the expense of what they already know and the way they have come to know it. Non-Native people also need to recognize the coexistence of multiple world-views and knowledge systems, and find ways to understand and relate to the world in its multiple dimensions and varied perspectives. (Barnhardt and Kawagley, 2008, p. 226)

The narratives provide an opportunity for us to visit the lives of participants from varying family circumstances. Three of the participants, Karla, Shania and Jason grew up in Winnipeg and spent their school years in Seven Oaks School Division. Carol moved to Winnipeg from a rural setting and attended urban schools from Grades 1-12. Laura moved with her family from a rural community into the city at the end of Grade 9 and Rick relocated to Winnipeg without his family at the end of Grade 9.

The issue of relocation is one that deserves further exploration. Why did three of the six students move to Winnipeg to access a high school education? What were the costs emotionally, socially, culturally and financially to their families?

Rick gives us a glimpse into his experience. Rick had an aunt and uncle who were the only family members to graduate from high school. Rick clearly sensed the expectations that he become the third member of the family to complete high school. To accomplish this Rick left his reserve community to live in Winnipeg with house parents returning home only during the Christmas and summer holidays.

> **Rick:** It was really scary, being only fourteen and being here by myself. I remember my first day of school; I didn't want to go I was so scared. I was—you know I had genuine fear inside of me. And I was no longer the smartest kid in the school anymore. I was just a regular person now and the school was huge compared to my school at home, something I hadn't seen before. So it was tough, it was really tough the first day or two to just go to school.

Rick's story raises questions about the lack of equitable funding for federally operated schools. The inability of students in many First Nations and Métis settings to access a quality high school education places a huge demand on youth to grow up quickly, to face the challenges of relocation and to be on their own in distant and unfamiliar settings.

When facing a personal tragedy Rick was able to access a band counsellor in a crisis situation, the murder of his cousin. A school counsellor quickly made contact with the band home placement counsellor and support was provided. Rick stated that this averted his "almost quitting school in May of my graduating year."

The importance of the many ways in which families contributed to the education of the participants emerges throughout all of these narratives.

> **Carol:** My mother worked with me a lot when I was younger. She helped me a lot in terms of reading; I read by the time I was three. I think that really helped. I picked up things quite quickly and I picked them up early – you know being exposed to reading at an early age really helped me become successful.

Shania's mother ensured that she learn how to speak Anishanaabe. She played a significant role in helping Shania to face the difficult issues that she encountered along her educational journey and to carefully examine her options in resolving those issues. Laura's parents "were always there if I needed help with homework, or there to push me if I didn't wake up in the morning."

Shania cites an early example in Grade 9 when she was told by a teacher that she was not her personal tutor and that there were tutors available for low income families if she so needed. Clearly it took thought and a great deal of courage for Shania to approach the school administrator. She states "my hands were sweaty and my heart was pounding …." With the support of her mother and other significant adults Shania affirmed her identity as a young Aboriginal woman and found her personal and political voice in both the school and school division.

Shania's story also serves to remind us that the cycle of abuse remains close at hand:

> **Shania:** I think there still needs to be a better understanding of Aboriginal people—of how much and how far we've come from back then. I could say I have achieved a lot more than what many people were able to do in the past. Like my mom; my mother broke that cycle of abuse. She was physically abused, sexually abused but she made sure that I didn't go through that and now I am making sure that my kids get protected from that happening. You know we are breaking that cycle of abuse and building up to be stronger people.

Through the narratives we are reminded that there are multiple ways to construe "family" and that there is no such thing as a "single" Aboriginal culture. Each Aboriginal person's journey to find their identity as an Aboriginal person is different.

> **Jason:** Like I said before, I spent a lot of time in my parents' communities and just the fact that I had such a close family, not just immediate family but cousins, and aunties and uncles, made me proud of who I am. We were all proud to be who we are. It's just the way our family raised us and I think that knowing we had that family support behind us just made us proud of our background.

Carol, Laura, and Jason were clearly connected to and proud of their Métis heritage. Karla, on the other hand, tells of resisting her mother's attempts to explore and experience her Métis roots. She denied her heritage until she enrolled in a university course, offered within the school division, where she began to learn about the history of Aboriginal peoples in Canada. In reading her narrative we sense that the professor recognized this fragile beginning and provided gentle support and encouragement for her

as she explored her history. This led to new understandings about her family histories and relationships:

> **Karla:** I started looking into them [residential schools] then and my Mom helped me a lot with that because it was sort of heartbreaking. This was the first time I had realized how bad it had been and that my great-grandmother was in a residential school. I don't remember her at all but I am as close with my Papa [grandfather] as he'll let anybody be. And I didn't understand then, like I realize now after all the research that I've done, why it is that he is as closed off as he is. It has a lot to do with how his mother treated him and with how she was treated in residential schools.

Karla began to find her voice as an Aboriginal woman. She states, "As part of my presentation to the class, I ended up doing a smudge in the multipurpose room and just having everybody sitting in a circle while I talked about the residential schools." Karla's story demonstrates a strong connection and pride in her culture. She cites many examples of learning about her Aboriginal roots, finding her voice as an Aboriginal person and leader, teaching others about her culture as well as about defending her culture in the face of racism or discrimination.

Rick is proud of his traditional Aboriginal roots. His urban school experience separated him from his culture while attending school in Winnipeg, since he was only able to visit his family at Christmas and during the summer vacation. He did not connect with the few other Aboriginal students at his high school.

> **Rick:** It wasn't so tough being Aboriginal. It was tough trying to fit in, like me being one of five or six noticeable Indians in school; it was oh so tough. And the thing is, those people never, ever talked to me, those other Native people that I knew were Indians, they never talked or hung out together. You know, I found it very awkward trying to talk with them because they were very, very, you know, "Oh this guy is not an Indian." So, it really baffled me.

Rick became friends with a group of Filipino students. He "fit in" to such a degree that his Aboriginal identity became invisible to others. He describes an incident where one of his longtime city friends overheard his father speaking with him in Cree:

> "What language is that Rick?"
> "Oh, it's Cree."
> "You're Native?"
> My buddy Marco was just killing himself. He knew I was Native and said,
> "You're an Indian?"
> "Yeah, I'm an Indian. Why?"
> "I thought you were Filipino."
> "Well, why would you think that?"
> "Well, you've got the hair, you talk like them."
> Actually I was picking up the Filipino dialect. I was picking up the language because all of my best friends were Filipino.

Rick's experience helped him to develop a love for the diversity of the school population. His friendships from those years endure as does his connection to the Aboriginal community. Rick now works as a residential school counsellor in rural Manitoba.

A Strong Sense of Belonging

Friendships

As one reads through the narratives it becomes evident that developing a sense of belonging to the school learning community contributes positively to the education of a student. Rick paints a wonderful image of a school that is warm and inviting to students as they walk through the door.

> **Rick:** First thing in the morning was my favorite part of school. I would get to school and see my friends all over like meeting new people every day. Yeah, the hallways were small you know—shaking hands with everybody on the way to class to a point where it was even the teachers. "Good morning Rick." "Good morning Rick," going through the halls ….
>
> **Jason:** I can't really say that my experiences in middle school were all that good but when I got to high school I loved it. I just liked being there. A lot of my cousins from Matheson Island and Pine Dock went there so we just kind of stuck together. I always had the same group of friends until probably Grade 10 or 11. That's when I started hanging out with my cousins. There were four or five of us, four all the time, sometimes five, that hung out together. We became really close because they came here from communities where they didn't have a high school. Since they were from small towns, I was you know, kind of like their connection to the city and we just hung out all the time.
>
> **Laura:** On the first day before classes started there was a Grade 9 orientation day. When I registered they gave me the option of attending the orientation because I was a new student even though I was going into Grade 10. I decided to go and I met girls that were in my same age group. We did activities all day together and from then on those girls were my friends.

Laura's experience in transitioning from a small rural school to an urban high school was made less overwhelming through a personal invitation extended to her to attend a day of community building activities at the school orientation in Kildonan Park. She connected with students with whom she remained friends throughout high school. Carol, Jason and Karla mention extra-curricular activities in sports or the arts as being influential in their development.

Learning with and from Peers

One of the purposes of research is to communicate that which is silent. Initially, in the reading of the narratives, the turtle we encounter reflects the importance of friendships in creating a sense of place within the schools. Upon further examination another turtle emerges. Peer relationships also help to connect students to their learning.

Jason, Rick, Laura and Carol specifically mentioned the academic support provided by friends. Rick was influenced by his group of friends who could often be found outside, sitting on the grass, reading books. It was important to them to "be in that library two hours a day studying with a staff monitor." Eventually Rick began to study more and found that his marks did improve. Rick's description of the way in which his friends ensured that his name not be dropped from the Grade 12 math class list in September

when he was late returning to Winnipeg from the reserve due to a health issue demonstrates both his and his friends' commitment to completing his education. Jason spoke of the importance of the friends one chooses:

> **Jason:** You'll notice there's something about being included when your classes get out. You can just walk up to somebody and say, "Hey I want to talk to you about this problem here." I have a question about something from class …. Just to be able to do that you have to be open. And that's a problem for a lot of Aboriginal people. We're shy; it's hard for us to just walk up to people we've never met before and ask them about school. So many different things affect that shyness. It's hard to stop it.

Although Shania did not refer to specific friendships in her narrative, she spoke of finding, in her schools, opportunities to work with her peers to explore her Aboriginal culture and to engage in education in a social context.

> **Shania:** I really enjoyed that class because in the Native Awareness class we were able to expand through all the schools—like show our culture. Right now in my high school's office there's this big, big, about three foot, picture that we made and it has a big dream catcher and bear paws and you know that was just us as a group doing it. The administrators were so fond of it they wanted to hang it in the office. You know those are things we're proud of. It's still hanging there now.

Gert Biesta reminds us:

> Instead of seeing learning as an attempt to acquire, to master, to internalize, or any other possessive metaphors we can think of, we might see learning as a reaction to a disturbance, as an attempt to reorganize and reintegrate as a result of disintegration. We might look at learning as a response to what is other and different, to what challenges, irritates, or even disturbs us, rather than as the acquisition of something we want to possess. (2006, p. 27)

What constitutes a good education?
For whom is it good?
Who gets to decide?
How might we become better?

Caring Student/Teacher Relationships

Several of the participants in the research described specific teachers as being exceptional educators. Rick encountered teachers who were both passionate about learning and determined that their students attended regularly and did their homework. He enjoyed teachers who were characters and who had a good sense of humour. Several teachers he described as having been helpful, kind, or inspirational; others took time to help him to understand the learning journey, including their own, to counsel him and to be available to help when required. Rick also spoke of teachers who helped him through difficult periods such as the transition into a city school feeling scared, unprepared and alone.

> **Rick:** Well, I didn't quit, I didn't quit because I remember people in my head telling me not to; like I asked teachers for help to get to where I was—one teacher in particular,

> Mr. P. I could thank him for my success in school …. remember his voice in my head kept telling me to keep going …. You're okay, keep going, keep going forward.

Laura talks about a teacher who was strict but "kind of pushed you in a good way." She enjoyed her teacher that integrated Aboriginal perspectives into the English Language Arts curriculum, and like Rick, she appreciated teachers who were available to provide additional assistance. Jason appreciated a teacher who was from a town situated near his reserve and who, surprisingly from Jason's perspective, did not have a prejudiced view of Aboriginal people. He spoke of a Native Studies teacher who provided support to his cousins who came into a large high school from a very small reserve when they were in Grade 10 and of other teachers who would take the time to personally check with students to see how they were faring:

> **Jason:** … calling kids after class and saying, "you know, are you okay with this. How do you feel?" Cause that's what a lot of Aboriginal students need is to be taken aside and asked, "Hey, how do you feel?" you know and most of them are just waterfalls waiting to happen—like waiting for the floodgates to open.

Karla gave an example of a teacher who recognized her interest and ability in creative writing and who spent time helping her to develop her skills in that particular area. In his book, *Possible Lives*, Mike Rose (1999) refers to good teaching as being "defined by its tendency to push at the borders of things" (p. 13). Karla's teacher had a good understanding of his student and was able to make specific educational judgments that helped her to expand and explore her love of writing. Karla provides us with another example of what it means to educate. Until the age of 17 she fought against learning anything about her Aboriginal heritage. She did not even admit to being Aboriginal even though her mother was active in the community. While taking a university course in high school her professor recognized her struggle and helped her, in a very supportive, patient manner, to begin to confront it.

> One cannot be conscious of the world without being first aware of oneself. To know who you are, what your place in the world is, and that you are to strive to seek life is what self-awareness is all about. It is the highest level of human knowledge, to know oneself so intimately that you are not afraid to tell others of life … (Barnhardt and Kawagley, 2008, p. 232)

Karla's story of being encouraged to explore her Aboriginal roots demonstrates the impact of good teaching upon her understanding of herself and her history.

> **Karla:** Having a professor ask me to learn and talk about Native experiences and not giving me any restrictions at all just saying, "I'm going to go into this unit on residential schools so it would be good if you could like talk about some stuff for an hour, you know whatever." Obviously he didn't say it like that but nobody had ever approached me and my Aboriginality in that way before. To ask me about it and to give me time to prepare as well was good. If he had just said, "Let's just do a chat about it," I would have had nothing to say. I would have said, "It's 6 o'clock. I've got to go home." You know, just having somebody ask me about it and ask me to share what I could find about it and to share what I wanted to share about in any way that I wanted to, was very liberating.

> … it becomes clear that one of the key educational responsibilities is that of providing opportunities for individuals to come into the world …. Teachers and other educators not only have a crucial task in creating the opportunities and a climate in which students can actually respond, they also have the task in challenging their students to respond by confronting them with what and who is the other and by posing such fundamental questions as "What do you think about it?", "Where do you stand?", and "How will you respond?" (Biesta, 2006, p. 28)

Shania recalls a course in which she needed to achieve 80% on all tasks and assignments to be allowed to remain in the program. "I never had to re-do a test so—the more expectation you have of me, the harder I'll try. The more I'll push." Shania describes another teacher from her high school experience who played a strong mentorship role for her throughout high school and into her post secondary training.

Several of our participants tell of the importance of extra-curricular activities and long term connections made with teachers with whom they had worked over several years.

> **Carol:** My favourite part of school was all the activities. I'm the type of person who really loves school. I prefer it to working. I wish I was still in University just taking part in all the extra-curricular activities. I always loved music and taking part in plays at school and I played guitar for a number of years and participated in gymnastics. I was pretty active and I had a lot of friends.
>
> **Rick:** I mean one of the physical education teachers kept us pretty busy. Even though when we weren't involved, she got us involved in it. She was very easy to talk to …. She played with her heart. She made it fun.

The participants in this study have shared their stories of good teaching. In Seven Oaks School Division we have had many opportunities to speak with students and parents over many years about what constitutes good teaching. "What strikes us time and time again is the consistency of these qualities: in essence, they describe people who attempt to lead good and worthwhile lives—and contribute to the lives of other people" (Ash & Hedrich, 2008, p. 35).

Through the stories we are reminded of the fundamental importance of educational relationships. Do our teaching practices focus on ways of getting to know the children and youth in our care? Do we create spaces for their stories?

What constitutes a good education?
For whom is it good?
Who gets to decide?
How might we become better?

Indigenous Knowledge in Education

Do our students see themselves reflected in the structures, content and pedagogy of our classrooms and schools?

> If as a society we were to re-think our schools, and commit ourselves to doing more than what we have just barely begun to do in the way of making them into places where Aboriginal people and cultures are experienced and celebrated, if we were to make our community's Aboriginal reality part of the air we breathe in our schools, the results would be dramatic. (Silver, Mallett, Greene and Simard, 2002, p. 54)

The years in which the participants were students in Seven Oaks School Division vary widely. Some graduated in the late 1980s, some in the 90s and some graduated in the past decade. The earlier graduates have almost no recollection of Aboriginal perspectives being incorporated in any way into their schooling. Carol learned about Aboriginal culture from her parents. Her first encounter with Aboriginal perspectives in a formal educational setting was in Red River Community College. Karla, a more recent graduate, had her first meaningful encounter with her Aboriginal heritage while taking a *First Year University Now* course offered during her Grade 12 year. Rick recalled a focus on Aboriginal art as part of one of his high school art courses, while Jason spoke, unhappily, about a dream catcher activity. Laura told of teachers who would try to raise Aboriginal perspectives within the content of their courses but who would cease when met with resistance from students. Shania stands alone as someone who enjoyed many opportunities to learn about, share, and teach about her culture throughout her school experience.

> **Shania:** Now I'm remembering Grade 4 when I brought in my jingle dress and did presentations for the whole school, Kindergarten to Grade 6 in the library. I had sweet grass and cedar in my jingle dress, all dressed up in my outfit and I did performances for each grade as they came into the library and just kind of spoke about the jingle dress—the colours, the sacred medicines. Ah, there's so much.

Most of the activities described in the narratives could be described as "add-on processes that have not affected core learning" (Battiste, 2002, p. 21).

> Recently, however, many indigenous as well as non-indigenous people have begun to recognize the limitations of a monocultural education system, and new approaches have begun to emerge that are contributing to a better understanding of the relationship between indigenous ways of knowing and those associated with Western society and formal education. Our challenge now is to devise a system of education for all people that respects the diverse epistemological and pedagogical foundations provided by both indigenous and Western societies, as well as those of other cultural traditions. (Barnhardt and Kawagley, 2008, p. 228)

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Understanding Cultural Landscapes—Racism/Stereotyping

Although the purpose of the study was to attempt to identify factors that contributed positively to the overall school experiences of the participants, there was also an opportunity given to reflect upon negative experiences, thereby providing readers with a broader context. The issue of racism came up in five of the six narratives. Some examples were easy to recognize.

> **Jason:** When I got into high school, I played high school hockey and that's where the racism really came out and that was when having a cousin who also played hockey was really beneficial because it was just the two of us all the time. We'd go to hockey games together, go to practice together and we really became close because the racism in the dressing room was bad sometimes and we'd have to stand up for each other.

> **Karla:** Being outside the smoking doors hearing jokes, Indian jokes—this was a constant thing. Hearing people say that they had to reduce the speed limit down Main Street from 60 to 50 because of all the drunken Indians and all that stuff. It was really frustrating listening to that and then, when I am trying to respond, people would say, "You're not Native. You're not an Indian. Come on, you're Métis. That's not you. You're not them." And yeah, it was really difficult.

Jason cited similar encounters with racial slurs being made and peers then back tracking by saying, "Oh, I mean, not you. You're different."

> **Rick:** I remember having to field a whole bunch of questions on ceremonies and stuff like that, which I didn't know about because it was never, ever practiced in my family and in my community. I couldn't answer them and they'd say, you know, "What kind of an Indian are you Rick?" Like I'm supposed to know everything about Aboriginal culture and I didn't.

> **Shania:** I don't look full Native you know, so a lot of the racist comments didn't come directly to me but were in classrooms you know, when we started talking about Aboriginal culture and how we came along. That's when I started hearing children saying that Aboriginals are nothing but drunks and on welfare.

> **Shania:** Racism happens not only with Aboriginal people. The week before Spring Break we had an incident here where a girl brought her heritage food and she warmed it up in the microwave and it kind of smelled up the room. Two boys walked in and said, "Ewe, what's that smell? That's gross." And that girl closed her lunch and put her head down and started crying.

Jason felt lucky that in his classrooms, discussions about Aboriginal issues or perspectives never arose. He describes clearly a feeling that he gets as he imagines such a discussion. Jason states, "It's a kind of nervous feeling when you sit there and you're waiting, just waiting for the comments to start and it's almost like you start shaking and you start to sweat because you know it is coming."

Shania makes reference to a classroom discussion being conducted by a student teacher who was attempting to involve students in discussion about Aboriginal perspectives related to the topic being studied. The situation was poorly handled as a number of students expressed views that were overtly racist. The result was traumatizing to Shania

and we are left wondering how such an event impacts upon the other students in the class. Will they feel anxious the next time a topic related to Aboriginal perspectives arises in class? Have some of their own racist feelings been solidified by this classroom discussion? Will they leave the classroom trying to figure out ways in which they could have challenged their racist peers or contributed an alternate point of view? What about this teacher … or any teacher who has experienced a classroom discussion which has been derailed? Will he or she avoid ever raising these types of questions again? Will the teacher engage in deeper learning about the topic and be able to frame better questions and reframe the learning context to successfully engage students in a positive learning experience? Will the teacher fall back on activities that are less outwardly controversial?

In Laura's narrative the question of the power of students to oppress the inclusion of Aboriginal perspectives is also noted.

> **Laura:** In terms of my Aboriginal identity being affirmed, Aboriginal culture was never really brought up in class—like we never really talked about the stuff in the classroom. It was brought up in one class, but wasn't really in depth. It was kind of integrated in some of the books we read and stuff, but not really, because the kids wouldn't go with it so then we'd do something different.
>
> **Jason:** You wonder who's going to turn around and ask you a question thinking you should know the answer. That's one thing that always kind of bugs me is when people think that because I am Aboriginal I know how to put on a sharing circle.

Jason and Rick bring forward the area of sensitivity that can emerge in how questions are brought forward into a public dialogue or avoided altogether for fear of being interpreted as being racist.

> **Jason:** There's so many stereotypes coming into school and there's so much pressure on non-Aboriginal people when they're around Aboriginal people about being racist and about not being racist that it kind of clouds their vision a lot. I try so hard to not be racist when I am around non-Aboriginal people but I think it's just a human reaction.
>
> **Rick:** They say that teachers pick on them, that teachers are racists. They blow it out of proportion. I don't think that teachers are racist. I think they are green around the ears, but who isn't coming from their last year of university.

At the same time, the narratives do reveal issues of stereotyping and racism by school staff. For example, Shania describes a math teacher who is frustrated by her requests for assistance in grasping a difficult concept. She was told, "I am not your personal math tutor and if your parents can't afford it there are tutors for low income families." When she became pregnant she had some teachers say to her, "So what are you going to do now? Be on welfare?"

Educators, at times, may not be aware of the power of their words and actions and of the long term impact that they have upon students. Mike Rose (1999) writes, "Do not think that because a child cannot read a text, he cannot read *you*. Children can tell right off those people who believe in them and those who patronize them" (p. 17).

Fortunately Shania is a resilient woman who, with strong support from her family, was able to progress well in school despite such derogatory comments and attitudes. Issues of racism cited in the narratives, covering a span of many years, remind us of the enormous responsibility that we have to interrupt this cycle.

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Into the Future

> The Seven Oaks School Division is a community of learners, every one of whom shares the responsibility in acquiring an education which will enable them to lead fulfilling lives within the world as moral people and contributing members of society. (Seven Oaks Mission Statement)

The mission statement raises critical questions. What is a community of learners? Who is invited to participate in this community? In what ways? What is our collective and individual responsibility and to whom are we responsible? What is a fulfilling life? What does it mean to act morally and what does it mean to be a contributing member of society? The discussions over many years have been complex and have surfaced many tensions and dilemmas in education … with the ultimate question always being … how might we become better at providing a good education for those within our educational community?

Dr. Marie Battiste poses very similar questions in her paper *Indigenous Knowledge and Pedagogy in First Nations Education: A Literature Review with Recommendations* (2002):

> The studies, however, do not examine the culture of the schools themselves to see what counts as knowledge and truth and what does not. They do not study what, or whom, the curriculum and pedagogy represses, excludes, or disqualifies. Nor do they examine who continually benefits from education and how these students are consistently rewarded and nourished in schools where white privilege is normalized. (p. 16)

There are many questions that emerge from this paper that invite further study and action:

> Fundamental to the notion of inquiry as stance is the idea that educational practice is not simply instrumental in the sense of figuring out how to get things done, but also and more importantly, it is social and political in the sense of deliberating about what to get done, why to get it done, who decides, and whose interests are served. Working from and with an inquiry stance, then, involves a continual process of making current arrangements problematic; questioning the ways knowledge and practice are constructed, evaluated, and used; and assuming that part of the work of practitioners individually and collectively is to participate in educational and social change. (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009, p. 121)

> Rather, practitioners engage in inquiry of the kind we are describing here because they are committed to taking action to improve the day-to-day school lives and futures of the

> students and families with whom they work. In short, the larger purpose-the bottom line-of inquiry as stance is education for social change and social justice. (Cochran-Smith, Lytle, 2009, p. 150)

How do stories educate? Through the stories of our participants we have tried to understand the impact of schooling in the lives of six Aboriginal graduates. These stories help us to recognize the importance of deeply understanding the cultural landscapes of Aboriginal students and of seeking ways to help to affirm their identities. Are Aboriginal perspectives reflected in the structures, content, fabric of the life of the school? Do we recognize that drawing upon Aboriginal ways of knowing could help to broaden and strengthen the learning experiences of all children?

Through the stories we are told of the importance of having staff members in schools who are willing to notice, pay attention to and seek out Aboriginal students. We need to consider the implications of our actions or lack of action:

> *... a teacher personally inviting Laura to the school orientation where she formed lasting friendships.*
> *… a coach not noticing issues of racism in the change room.*
> *… a teacher mentoring a high school student—encouraging her to enter post secondary education.*
> *... a teacher not noticing Jason as he sat in class during a discussion related to a video: He reflected: "It's kind of nervous feeling when you sit there and you're waiting, you're just waiting for comments to start and you're waiting for that racism to start and it's almost like you start shaking and you start to sweat because you know that is coming."*

It is imperative that we listen more closely and watch more carefully.

These stories emphasize how critical it is to staff our schools with people who demonstrate a passion in their teaching and who are diligent in attempting to draw students into the educational experience. Based on our participants' stories these adults are inspiring, insightful, kind, thoughtful and good humoured. Staff members who have high expectations, who invite students to take on new challenges and then support them along the way are the people who are fundamental in helping students to have success.

These stories are a strong indication of the powerful possibilities that exist when parents, peers and all members of a child's educational life "share the responsibility to assist children in acquiring an education which will enable them to lead fulfilling lives within the world as moral people and contributing members of society" (Seven Oaks School Division Mission Statement).

Certainly the stories have brought to our attention complex issues related to racism and cultural stereotyping that must be examined and addressed. This is an area that will require us to deepen our understanding of the overt and subtle layers of racism and the ways they impact upon our students.

Through telling and listening to lived stories we can come to better understand our own biases, assumptions and beliefs. In turn this experience ought to lead us to new insights, educational judgments and to ethical action.

Through inquiry we look for the turtles ….

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