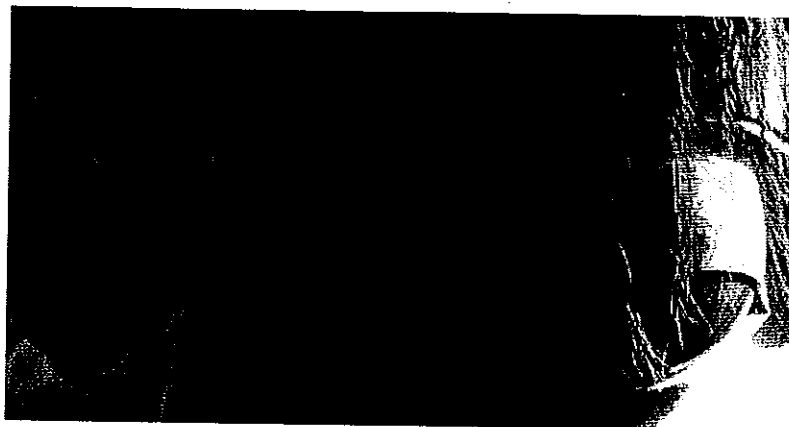


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detail of Human Mask by Tlingit/Tahltan artist Dempsey Bob

Blurring the Literascope

A Study of First Nations' Parent and Teacher Voice in Family Literacy Curriculum Design

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Lush, soft pink blossoms above and a carpet of fallen flowers below. This is the view as I enter the inner city school I have worked in for the past ten years. Once inside the brick building I hear wails of laughter from staff and students. It is a loud boisterous community that loves coming to school. Staff are engaged and busy preparing for the upcoming school day, while children buzz about talking and playing. As I make my way upstairs to my classroom, parents greet me with warm smiles and casual conversation. The cacophony of voices fills my ears with contentment. We are indeed, a community of learners. Or are we?

More recently, it is what I do not see nor hear that interrupts my journey as an educator. I notice very few First Nations parents in our playground, hallways, or classrooms. More importantly, I do not hear their voices. It is this absence and silence I choose to investigate.

As a co-developer of family literacy programs at our school, I am about to participate in the creation of an Aboriginal program in the next few months. While this idea excites me, I am plagued by the following questions: Who is the "real" expert/teacher with regard to family literacy education? Am I willing to involve parents in the development of the program thereby decreasing my own power as teacher? Will I be able to hear Aboriginal parent voices through my own white, middle class teacher perspective? How is literacy defined by Aboriginal families?

I decide to embark on a journey I know little about. After nineteen years of teaching, I am

tired of listening to my own voice. The central question of my research becomes, how can we, as educators and parents together, create a family literacy program that builds on the assets and meets the needs of First Nations families?



detail of Imich Siiyem by Musqueam artist Susan Point

Current discussions of curriculum theory have provided me with the impulse and courage needed to move forward with this inquiry. The importance of involving parents in curriculum development was reinforced for me through the theories of Pinar (1996), Grumet (1996), Goff (1998) and Aoki (1993).

Pinar (1996) states that “what is basic to curriculum can be linked with questions of self and identity” (24). He further claims, “A Eurocentric and patriarchal curriculum is not basic; historically and in the present period, not to say the future, it is marginal” (23). Understanding curriculum as a racial text is critical. I have not done this before. I have accepted curriculum as it was presented to me in university textbooks and government documents. I am now beginning to wonder about curricular racism, that is, a curriculum that privileges Eurocentric ideals and excludes or represses Aboriginal knowledge, history and languages. Curriculum should care about and celebrate the world that Aboriginal families live in and value. Grumet (1996) states that curriculum is about caring, family

groupings, small classes, connections, choices and conversations. While I agree with this statement, I do not see nor hear the connections, choices and conversations occurring between the Aboriginal community and my school. This must change.

Grumet (1996) claims that we must “surround children with adults who care about them” (19). Grumet continues, “What is basic to the elementary school curriculum is the space and time and presence” that makes caring relationships possible (19). Teachers are not the only caring individuals involved in children’s lives. Dialogue must occur between parents, caregivers and educators. It is not the textbooks, concepts, and equations that constitute curriculum, “but the conversations that makes sense of these things. Curriculum is that conversation” (Grumet, 1996, 19). My research question and methodology demands that I take the time to listen and engage in dialogue with Aboriginal parents. My complete presence is mandatory. It is these conversations that will help me make sense of Aboriginal family literacy and lived experiences.

Teachers today are used to hearing about the “outcomes” of programs. The outcomes I care about cannot be measured with immediate, behavioural data. They are far more complex. The curriculum developed as a result of my research will be deliberative and collaborative. Chaos theory would be an appropriate framework to view the development of this curriculum (Goff, 1998). It will be a process that involves the participants in a dynamic, unpredictable and complex, social practice. Goff (1998) states that “Curriculum is both significant and fuzzy because it is a social practice. A practice is a process, a means, a method, and everything that evokes growth and development. When this process is a social one, it becomes even more dynamic and complex and more often than not, unpredictable” (Goff, 1998, 29). My understanding of the literascape has been linear, rational and orderly. I test students, implement a program, then re-test again. As a teacher I work in isolation for the most part.

Aoki (1993) states that the curriculum landscape “is ever open, knowing no beginning and no end” (261). Like Aoki, I am currently interested in the process, or middle of the curriculum. Unlike “management pedagogies” that attempt to control curriculum, I want to embrace Aboriginal families’ unique culture and history (Giroux, 1988). My intention is to realign myself, as a curricularist, to the textured landscape of First Nations culture. I acknowledge that I have a EuroCanadian orientation to curriculum.

I look forward to examining my assumptions and approaches to lesson design, through my research. My goal is to share in the development of a vital, living program that embodies the stories First Nations families speak. It is their landscape I must learn to navigate. I look ahead to discovering what Aoki (1993) calls the “archi-texture” (255) of First Nations’ curriculum.

Literature Review

Through my readings about Aboriginal pedagogy, I have developed an understanding of the appropriateness of writing a literature review based on Indigenous knowledge. The purpose of the literature review is to critically discuss published knowledge in relation to a research question. The very nature of a literature review reflects a Eurocentric ideal. A literature review is an analysis of written, published works. The final product is also written. Aboriginal knowledge has been passed onto generations through Indigenous languages, oral tradition, symbolism and art, to name a few. The literature review directly contradicts this oral, symbolic tradition. As a EuroCanadian researcher, I have been careful to select a variety of sources of information that include First Nations scholars, in an attempt to learn about Aboriginal knowledge, through the written word. I endeavour to add

to the respectful literature, published by non-Native researchers, in the field of Aboriginal literacy.

The terms Aboriginal, Native and First Nations will be used interchangeably in this study to refer to all Aboriginal people; status, non-status, Metis and Inuit.

While reviewing the literature for my question, I found I was drawn to many different sources of data. A combination of theoretical, conceptual and practical data formed the foundation for this literature review. The topics are sociohistorical realities, social, economic and health risks, Aboriginal parent involvement and family literacy.



detail of The Spirit of Haida Gwaii, The Jade Canoe by Haida artist Bill Reid

Sociohistorical Realities

Any study regarding effective teaching of Aboriginal students must be situated within the complexities of history. An extensive amount of research supports the fact that historical, coercive assimilation policies are responsible for many of the problems that exist between Aboriginal parents and schools today (Butterfield & Pepper, 1992; Perley, 1993).

The residential school has “become a metaphor for the history of Aboriginal education in British Columbia, as in Canada more generally” (Barman, 1995, 57). Battiste (1998), a prominent Aboriginal scholar, states that “Aboriginal children were subjected to persistent violence, powerlessness, exploitation, and cultural imperialism, only to become impoverished and devastated in the cognitive and physical aftermath of schooling” (45). While “half or fewer British Columbia Aboriginal children of past generations actually attended residential school, the numbers were sufficient for family life to deteriorate” (Barman, 1995, 73). It is clear that the legacy of residential schools has had a direct impact on how Aboriginal people view the education system today.

The colonialism faced by First Nations communities echoes the political position Freire (1970) makes in his book, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. Freire posits that “The invaders penetrate the cultural context of another group, in disrespect of the latter’s potentialities; they impose their own view of the world upon those they invade and inhibit the creativity of the invaded by curbing their expression” (150).

Battiste (1986) reflects Freire's idea of oppression in her definition of "cognitive imperialism." She claims cognitive imperialism is "a form of cognitive manipulation used to discredit other knowledge bases and values and seeks to validate one source of knowledge and empower it through public education. It has been the means by which the rich diversity of peoples have been denied inclusion in public education while only a privileged group have defined themselves as inclusive, normative and ideal" (Battiste, 1998, 46). Battiste injects Freire's pedagogical notion of oppression directly into the classrooms of our public schools.

Social, Economic and Health Risks

In addition to the legacy of colonization and imperialistic policies, many Aboriginal families also face the challenges of inner-city life. Lack of food, safety, shelter, warm clothing and stability continue to be risk factors faced by many First Nations families.

The 1999 Vancouver/Richmond Health Board report entitled, *Healing Ways* confirms that Native families living in Vancouver face serious challenges (Joseph, 2001). This report was conducted after serious health issues were raised within the Aboriginal community. The report further uncovered that for the approximately 4300 First Nations children, under seven, living in the Lower Mainland, approximately eight out of ten are living in poverty. Health levels are also very low. Complex issues are impacting the early development of Aboriginal children and many face subsequent problems upon entering kindergarten, (Joseph, 2001).

The long term results of these statistics is that the graduation rates of Aboriginal learners is 23% while those of non-Aboriginal learners is 78%, in Vancouver schools (Vancouver School Board, 2003). It is clear that Aboriginal families face complex social, economic and health risks. All of these risk factors place an enormous burden and responsibility on local communities. The report calls for healing strategies that include the family.

Aboriginal Parent Involvement

Many educational researchers have validated the relationships between parental involvement and student achievement. A significant body of research supports the claim that when parents are involved through reinforcing curriculum, promoting cognitive development at home and volunteering in the classroom, children have better attendance rates, complete more homework, demonstrate more positive behaviours and attitudes, achieve higher grades, graduate at higher rates and have greater involvement in higher education (Henderson & Berlan, 1994).

At first glance most people would not argue with this research. The data, however, tends to concentrate on parent involvement with mainstream groups, or in other words, the group with power. "Parents of ethnically and linguistically diverse students often fail to participate in numbers comparable to other majority group parents" (Delgado-Gaitin, 1991, 20).

A significant body of literature specifically supports the need for Aboriginal parent involvement in education. A review of the literature found data to support this need at the national, provincial and local levels.

A comprehensive Position Paper on Aboriginal Literacy, prepared by the National Aboriginal Design Committee, (2002), summarized common themes directly related to

Indigenous literacy. Within the theme of “holistic education,” it states that Aboriginal literacy is a process “in which Learners (sic) are equal partners, developing the curriculum and activities, in conjunction with the practitioner, as together they identify the issues, rather than merely working through a pre-packaged curriculum” (7).

At the provincial level, the 1998 Task Force on First Nations Education proposed numerous recommendations to the British Columbia Teachers Federation. This eight member task force was comprised of six people of First Nations’ heritage, one person with Metis background and one, non-Aboriginal participant. The task force investigated the effectiveness of the education system for First Nations students. Of the numerous recommendations made, one stated “That the BCTF encourage school districts to develop district Aboriginal Parent Advisory Committees” (18).

At the local level, the Vancouver School Board, First Nations Steering Committee, Strategic Plan (2001) called for further expansion of the district First Nations parent education group. It also stated its support for schools to encourage “participation of First Nations parents in meaningful aspects of school life” (23).

Despite the call for greater involvement, Aboriginal parent participation continues to be viewed as a problem from the perspective of many teachers, principals and government officials (Friedel, 2003). Lack of involvement may be due to the fact that First Nations parents are not being asked for their advice within school settings. Kirkness (1998) argues that Aboriginal parents “are rarely invited to meetings to decide on directions to be taken. They are rarely asked for their original thoughts on how or what should be done in certain situations” (13). Public schools continue to be closed to Aboriginal parents. Friedel (2003) suggests that “where residential schools might be viewed as cultural invasions, perhaps public schools can be seen as cultural occupation. In both cases parents remain on the outside looking in” (141-142).

It is evident that Aboriginal parents are not being asked for their input despite the overwhelming research that supports the need to do so. It is my intent that my small-scale study will contribute to the research regarding Aboriginal parent’s voices in curriculum design.



detail of Bear Mask by Tlingit/Tahltan artist Dempsey Bob

Family Literacy

Specifically, my project intends to look at First Nations parental input into family literacy

curriculum design. Again, the research regarding Aboriginal family literacy programs is lacking in the data.

In an extensive theoretical review of family literacy research, the critical role parents play was discussed. The literature makes a definitive judgment on this issue; parents must be full partners and be given responsibility and control in programs involving the literacy of their children (Cairney, 1995). Parents should also be involved in every stage of developing family literacy programs (Come & Anthony, 1995). This data supports the intent and methodology of my research.

Methods of Data Collection

I began my research by enlisting the help of our school's First Nations support worker. I told her I was interested in interviewing parents of preschool, kindergarten and grade one students at our school. While I wanted the interviews to resemble conversations I felt a list of questions would be helpful as a starting off point. The First Nations support worker and I collaborated on designing the interview questions that pertained to literacy activities that could be used in an Aboriginal family literacy initiative at our school. This collaboration helped me be sensitive to the values and beliefs of the Aboriginal communities from which the students and parents came from. I asked the parents specific questions about what they would like to see in a school based, family literacy program. I also asked them about their preferences for the time and structure of the program.

Once the questions were selected, the First Nations support worker contacted the parents and explained the study to them. Parents were assured of confidentiality and that there would be no adverse consequences to them or their children, if they declined to participate. If they consented to participation in the study, they were informed that they could quit at any time. Parents were told that the interview would take thirty to forty-five minutes and would be audiotaped. Seven parents verbally agreed to participate and subsequently ten different interview times were scheduled. In the end, a total of three parents were interviewed. I couldn't help but wonder if more parents would have attended the interview if the First Nations support worker had actually asked the questions.

On one occasion, a parent who had agreed to an interview came to my room and said she "wanted to talk." When I showed her the tape recorder and asked her permission to audiotape the conversation, she declined. At this point I asked her if we could continue the interview, without the audiotaping. She replied, "no" but indicated again her desire to "talk." We continued to have an extremely valuable conversation, the contents of which will not be included in this study. This experience however, reinforced for me that no matter how friendly or approachable I think I am, as a white, middle class teacher/researcher, I am also complicit in the school system. I am an outsider looking in, or is it I am an insider looking out? I think it's possible to be both.

After I had conducted my three parent interviews my curiosity grew regarding Aboriginal literacy. I had exhausted my potential parent participant list and decided to extend my study to include Aboriginal teacher voices. I was able to add two more interviews to my data from First Nations teachers who worked in the general vicinity of the school where I taught.

While I had asked parents what they'd like to participate in, I asked the First Nations teachers what their definition of Aboriginal literacy was. The parent and teacher information added considerably to my understanding of family literacy curriculum development for Aboriginal families.

Once the data was collected and audiotaped, I transcribed the interviews by hand. Analysis was conducted through the identification of recurring themes. These themes were revisited on many different occasions and viewed from different angles.

While a total of five interviews represents a small sample size, the data uncovered offers a valuable snapshot of Aboriginal parent and teacher voice, with regard to the development of family literacy and literacy in general.



detail of The Spirit of Haida Gwaii, The Jade Canoe by Haida artist Bill Reid

Findings

The data uncovered from the interviews fell into the following themes: Pre-contact, The Impact of EuroCanadian Contact, Aboriginal Parental Involvement, Literacy Needs of Aboriginal Parents, Assets/Gifts of Aboriginal Parents and the Recommended Structure of a Family Literacy Program.

Pre-Contact

Every participant discussed at length the importance of where they were from and their communities' traditions. While developing the interview questions with our school's First Nations support worker, I was advised to start with the question, where are you from? I had naively thought I could just begin with questions regarding literacy practices. One First Nations teacher informed me that

“Traditionally, you want to know where the other is from and what nation you're from. That's usually the first thing you ask. I don't think people realize, even in the city, people think first the municipal government or the provincial government or the federal government, but we look even before that, we look at the First peoples, so it's really important to know whose

land you're on and to acknowledge."

One parent spoke of her yearly visits to Kamloops to visit her family and attend cultural events.

"I make sure (my son) goes to the Kamloops' pow wow every year. I make sure he makes it to that one because my whole family is there for one. We see my grandmas, sisters and brothers there. It's really hard to get the family together. My uncle, I love him so much. He's got long, long, beautiful hair. He's really traditional and he goes to places and teaches people about our culture and praying. Whenever he knows that me and (my son) are in town he makes time to come over and sing some songs. He tells me what the songs mean. I can't believe we are so lucky that my uncle can do that for us."

Another parent spoke of her son's involvement in traditional dance.

"Mondays we have a dinner and we do arts and crafts, the parents, and we make regalia. We do it once a week. It's really great, the kids like it. Right now, I am actually working on an outfit for my son, a grass dance outfit, so hopefully he'll be dancing by Mother's Day."

At the center of Aboriginal literacy are Native languages. Battiste (1998) states "Aboriginal languages are the repository of vital instructions, lessons, and guidance given to our elders in visions, dreams and life experiences" (44). She adds, "Indigenous languages offer not just a communication tool for unlocking knowledge; they offer a process of orientation that removes us from rigid noun-centered reality and offers an unfolding paradigmatic process for restoration and healing" (Battiste, 1998, 50). One First Nations teacher spoke fondly of time spent listening to her grandfather sing in her Native language.

"My grandfather and I always went for walks in the countryside. I was really quite close to both of my grandparents. My grandpa was a really, big tall grandpa and he would do some singing in Blackfoot language but every time I do hear my language, I get very, very emotional automatically."

All participants talked about the importance of oral tradition in Aboriginal history. Aboriginal literacy is rooted in intergenerational teachings. Until recently, Aboriginal languages developed entirely through the oral mode. First Nations people learned through prayers, songs and the sharing of stories. It was this oral culture that created an intimate, connected community which served to strengthen Aboriginal identity.

"I came from a huge family and I was raised a great deal by my grandparents and through my grandparents is where I was taught a lot about storytelling. (My grandfather) told me stories and myths and legends about a mythical figure named Napi. He is this trickster character in our Blackfoot culture. It's interesting because I know of other First Nations groups. Pacific Northwest has the Raven (who) is also perceived as a trickster, who plays games and reinvents itself and changes into different forms. From the Pacific West Coast people, it's the Raven and for my people it's the actual Napi, which is a person, but he can also change into different types of figures, as well.

It was always oral. There was my grandpa (who) would sing to me as well,

during those stories. It was really, from my childhood that is a great deal of what I remember about tradition and literacy and culture.”

The Impact of EuroCanadian Contact

While all of the participants spoke of their pride in their cultural heritage, the intergenerational effects of colonialism were also mentioned. One parent spoke of her mother’s experience in the residential school system.

“My mom was running away from that (Native culture). She was running away from everything on the reserve because of the abuse she suffered. She just wanted to throw that aside for now and start it new, in the city.”

“Did she go to a residential school?”

“Yes, she did. That was very terrible, just like some of the movies. Really terrible. I don’t blame her for not talking about it. If I could teach (my son) our language and our songs. I really wish I could, but if there is somebody out there? Another Elder? (My son) likes to hear Native songs and I am sure some parents don’t like it at all, like how my mom doesn’t like it.”

The legacy of residential school left many families with the burden of addiction and abuse. One parent vividly recounted her time in a treatment center for addiction years ago.

“I went to a treatment center. I have a heroin addiction and I went there for that. I really sweated it out. It was bad. I didn’t take any of those other drugs. They said to take Methadone but I saw some of my friends doing it and I was like I don’t think I could change (my son’s) diaper if I look like that. So I just drank tea and took hot showers all day. I got through it. I had about three years off drugs but I’m telling you it was because of (my son.) If he wasn’t in existence then I’d probably still be doing it but I don’t want him to grow up like how I grew up.”

She continues to discuss the ongoing “ripple” of abuse that has impacted some Aboriginal families.

“Cause I’ve seen a lot of my friends when I was at treatment. One of my girlfriends got killed and her body was chopped and chucked away like a piece of garbage. It was not just what I’ve been through, but it’s also what I’ve seen, through some of my friends who didn’t make it. Most of my friends are Native friends and then their families, they got probably abused worse than I did so they ended up in a worse place than me and they couldn’t hold on anymore. I don’t know how I found the strength to hold on but I’m glad I did because one of my girlfriends, they’re not alive today. And for Natives, You ask any Native person and there’s stuff like that. It’s still got that ripple in there.”

Aboriginal Parental Involvement

While discussing family literacy activities, one parent and one teacher mentioned the need for Aboriginal parent involvement in schools today. They also spoke of the barriers for First Nations parents, as they perceived them. One parent spoke of the need for Aboriginal

parent presence in school but said that First Nations parents won't go into the school because of residential school history. This participant also mentioned that illiteracy of parents may be a problem.

The First Nations educator felt that a myriad of problems may be keeping parents out of schools.

"It could be many different reasons. It could be that parents have matters of their own. They may have small children. They're unable to make it to the school logistically. The school may be too far. Maybe different socioeconomic reasons. They are just unable to cope with school. It could be that they are knowingly wanting to become involved, however different situations in their life prevent them from being actively involved in their child's education."

The topic of racism also emerged as a possible barrier, when this teacher spoke of her own experience attending school in the mainstream, public education system.

"I always thought that I could do better but I always felt that I was being limited in the education system because I was First Nations. Everywhere I go, I see remnants of it. Like just today, for example, a little, tiny First Nations student came up to me and she said, "Indians are dumb, right?" And I said, "No, they're not." And she says, "Well, I'm not smart." And I said, "Yes, you are smart." And for me, there was a sense of anger and a sense of hurt and a sense of I'm going to make sure that I am going to be here to work with these kids so they can totally see different from that."

Literacy Needs of Aboriginal Parents

All parents wanted to see a mix of culturally sensitive materials and EuroWestern activities. While parents expressed the need for a bicultural approach, they stated the emphasis should be on First Nations materials. All participants however, acknowledged there was a lack of awareness regarding Aboriginal culture among First Nations people in general.

"I don't know anything about it. If you and me went to a pow wow together, we'd both know the same amount of things. We would both be looking at shopping and we'd both like hearing music, but I don't know what they are saying. I don't know why they are dancing like that."

One participant explained that her mother grew up in an orphanage. Due to her mother's upbringing, the participant felt that she was not exposed to her culture at an early age.

"I learned it on my own, as I got older. More in my teens, but I remember in some classes we learned West Coast art. Learning about animals and plants and how you say them in different languages. Reading and writing weren't really an emphasis."

While a third parent recognized that many First Nations people are not aware of their culture, she was thoroughly knowledgeable about her own heritage and Aboriginal literacy. She was active in her children's school and had acted as a co-facilitator in an Aboriginal Band preschool literacy group.

One parent and one teacher mentioned the diverse nature of Aboriginal groups. The teacher states:

“The First Nations culture is so diverse, especially in British Columbia and people don’t seem to understand that there are so many groups in B.C. They homogenize us. And across Canada, there may be two groups of people in one province, usually, but in B.C. there are fifty one.”

One must understand the nature of contemporary First Nations cultures in order to develop a culturally relevant program. While there may be some commonalities in values and practices of some groups, there are also many differences (Hamme, 1996). Educators of family literacy programs must not simply assume all First Nations cultures are the same. Differences exist in language, history, traditions and religious beliefs (Hamme 1996). In order to make a family literacy program meaningful, parents must be invited to share information about their cultural background.

Specific activities parents wanted to see in a family literacy program included storytelling, singing, (both Euro-western and First Nations songs), Native picture books, crafts, talking circles, cultural cooking and Elder involvement. This input supports Battiste’s (2002) claim that, “Literacy is not abstract but embedded in social contexts, and that underlying meanings are found in the social world of individuals, families and communities” (p. 20).

One teacher participant also confirmed the need for culturally relevant materials in an Aboriginal family, literacy program.

“I think to have resources, to have materials that are culturally sensitive, to have materials where First Nations students can actually learn about their culture and be able to work with their parents on that because there is a lot of material where it is very Eurocentric. It leaves a lot of material out of Canada and its First Peoples. And I think it’s really important that First Nations students know of who they are and where they come from and that they do have a place in society. That they are a part of the history of Canada. So it’s important that there are materials that can teach them that. It’s important to learn that from a young age. They have something to identify with because whatever you’re reading, you’re absorbing that information and you’re learning. And if it’s something that is completely foreign to you, it might not be recognizable. There might not be a connection to that book and what you are seeing.”

In addition to the need for connections to materials, one parent expressed her desire for her son to be connected to other First Nations students, in general.

“I think it (Aboriginal family literacy program) will be good for the kids because then they can acknowledge that there are other people like themselves around because I know my son feels really left out a lot. He’s the only Native kid, most of the time, all over the place, so I think he feels like he’s missing something.”

When parents were asked if they needed any materials to take home such as paper, crayons or markers they all stated they did not. They were, however, interested in sharing Native picture books with their children. They all wanted to see literacy activities woven into Aboriginal culture. Parents confirmed that holistic learning, story telling, culture and language are intrinsic to the definition of Aboriginal literacy (Beck, Walters & Francisco,

1995).

Paulsen (2003) also states that “culture, tradition, language, and ways of knowing are all interconnected in defining Aboriginal literacy (24). Educators must address Aboriginal approaches to learning, in general, as holistic, spiritual, experiential and transformative (Curwen Doige, 2003). One participant recounted a memory of her grandfather’s story telling that was filled with emotions.

“Still to this day, I remember many feelings and emotions that I went through. Just my imagination was open because during my grandfather telling me a story, I was imagining what the scenery would be like and the fears or what was going on within the story so I can still remember a lot. It was very, very rich. It was so my mind was constantly active on what my grandfather was saying. The meaningful thing about it is because this story has been brought down through the different generations, so my grandfather heard it from his grandfather and then from his grandfather. This is something I would like to share with my children whenever that day comes. It’s that part of my life, that part of learning is very, very special to me to this day. When I think of my grandpa, that’s something that I really hold true, near to my heart.”

In contrast, Curwen Doige (2003) argues “mainstream approaches to learning are secular, fragmented, neutral/objective, and seek to discover definitive truth” (147). While many mainstream, education policy makers would deny this definition one need look no further than the latest trends toward widespread testing and accountability measures to confirm its validity.

Symbolic literacy is also traditionally included in oral and written First Nations’ narratives. This symbolism creates a sharing of collective experience and common beliefs for Aboriginal people. Symbolism was also identified in one parent interview.

“Squalix means bear. Actually, that’s the white people’s way of saying it. It’s actually Squilax. It’s a bear, and to me, that word means a lot because when I think of a bear, I think of a female bear with her cubs and nothing can come between them. If you see a little baby cub, don’t go near him because mom is close by. I actually made a drum and I painted two bears on it. Then I wrote Squilax and Shuswap on the other side and I painted the mother with the fish and baby by the river. I made that for (my son). He really likes it. He likes the drum.”

All participants highlighted the need for Elders to be present at an Aboriginal family literacy program. Kirkness (1998) supports the inclusion of Elders in Aboriginal programs.

We expound on the importance of our Elders. We say they are our teachers, our libraries, our archives, yet we rarely include them in a meaningful way. We rarely ask them anything. It is through them that we can understand our unique relationship to the Creator, our connection with nature, the order of things, and the values that enhance the identity of our people. It is up to this generation of educational leaders to tap that valuable resource, because each day, fewer and fewer Elders whose knowledge goes back at least two generations are left to teach us what we need to know (13).

In summary, the needs of the parents are actually the very gifts they possess—their cultural

backgrounds. They want and need a family literacy program that highlights Aboriginal literacy activities. Literacy is seen as multidimensional by the parents. Literacy incorporates singing, music, art, storytelling, emotions, speaking and a way of being. Literacy encompasses Spirit, Heart, Mind and Body in a holistic approach. This study supports the statement made in the 2002 Position Paper on Aboriginal Literacy, “for programming (including but not limited to literacy) to be effective for Aboriginal Peoples, it must recognize and nurture all four parts” (National Aboriginal Design Committee, 2002, 7).

Assets/Gifts of Aboriginal Parents

My original research question asked, “How can we, as educators and parents together, create a family literacy program that builds on the assets and meets the needs of First Nations families?” This study uncovers that the needs and the gifts of Aboriginal parents are one and the same. The needs discovered in this study are related to culture, tradition and Aboriginal teachings. The First Nations peoples have a history of rich, diverse assets that have been taken away from them through colonialism and more recently, a dominant, Eurocentric curriculum. Aboriginal parent needs involve reclaiming their culture and infusing it into schools and literacy curriculum. My research question, in essence needs to be re-visioned to state: “How can we, as educators and parents together, create a family literacy program that builds on the gifts of Aboriginal culture?”

Overwhelmingly, the parents interviewed had numerous and enriching ideas regarding literacy activities for their children. Parents offered to invite family members who would be able to participate in the program such as sisters, fathers and brothers. The family members mentioned all had various talents related to Aboriginal art and traditions. Family members were storytellers, mask carvers, singers and drummers. When asked, parents also offered to lead literacy activities themselves. One mother offered to lead a talking circle.

“I think it’s good for (the children) to not be afraid to use their voices and to really encourage that. To really say what’s on their minds and have a moment to share. Everybody has to be really quiet and listen.”

Another parent participant provided me with a selection of picture books and associated activities such as fingerplays and songs to help support a program. Another parent offered to invite an Elder that she knew personally to any program that might happen in the future. I strongly felt that parents just needed to be asked for their input, guidance and support and they would be there to lead and or assist in any way they could.

The teacher participants spoke of the parents’ gifts as being resiliency, love, nurturing, trying their hardest and wanting the best for their children. These gifts were very self-evident throughout the interviews.

Recommended Structure of a Family Literacy Program

Parents wanted a family literacy program to begin after school. They suggested that the program should start with an informal snack time so that the children could relax and parents and staff could connect. An Aboriginal story, song or action game was recommended to follow next. An Elder leading the story or song was also suggested. Two parents suggested that songs and action games could also incorporate the children’s names so that they might feel more included and “special.” Parents liked the idea of having a shared parent/child time to participate in an activity together. They also supported the idea of having a teacher/parent time to get to know each other while the children played

together, in a separate area with a child care provider.

Implications

These interviews have provided me with an insight into the richness and complexities of parental voice and Aboriginal knowledge. Aboriginal voice needs to be heard and infused into literacy re-visioning. We need to blur and reshape the literascape as we know it today. The current literascape silences the voices of Aboriginal communities. In this study parents clearly requested bi-cultural content. This linkage and integration of world views would serve to breathe life into current literacy practices. My research does not suggest eliminating current literacy practices altogether but to soften and obscure the lines of the status quo. Family literacy curriculum should be de-standardized unless it hears the voices of the participants.

Do we need to consider expanding the possibilities of literacy and curriculum design to include multiple literacies for all students? For example, might we consider creating a curriculum for spiritual literacy? What about the literacy of dreams, intuition, and emotions? What if literacy encompassed a space that was complex and divergent and couldn't be tested? Chaotic? Maybe. Chaos isn't meant to be linear and rational. While it threatens the status quo by generating uncertainty it also creates the space for hope and change.

As one teacher participant states, "Being optimistic, I really feel that my generation is making a difference because it's our grandparents who went to the residential school. We are slowly, slowly, slowly, moving out of those repetitive cycles of feeling victimized. That is why my generation is becoming educated and very vocal and very active. I think if there are more people who can do that type of work, then there is real hope for our younger people, in the urban system."

Could it be that the "more people to do this work"—which involves becoming more active and vocal regarding Aboriginal literacy—includes non-Native teachers? Today, as many as seventy-five percent of First Nations children in Canada attend urban schools run by non-Aboriginal people (Urion, 2002, 3). This fact necessitates non-Native teachers requesting Aboriginal parent input, respecting Aboriginal world view and being responsive to Native voice. Due to lack of knowledge of Indigenous languages, funding restraints and practicality, and given the diverse nature of their classrooms, it is difficult for non-Native teachers to create a totally Aboriginal curriculum. A first step to address this problem would be to acknowledge a multiple-literacies approach. This would honor Aboriginal learners, and indeed, all learners.

As a privileged, white female educator, I have many more First Nations voices to listen to before I can begin to understand the oppressive landscape I have taught in for the last nineteen years. However, my voice regarding a transformed literacy for all students will be stronger because of the conversations I have had with parents and teachers which were filled with insight, magic, and inspiration.



detail of replica Thunderbird House Post by artist Tony Hunt

What I Have Learned as Teacher/Researcher/Learner

Throughout this incredible journey as teacher/researcher, I have learned many important lessons about the power of curriculum and the power of voice.

I have learned to look at curriculum as ever shifting and dynamic. Curriculum is a racial text that constantly needs to be scrutinized and challenged. It is written on paper but not in stone. I have learned that curriculum can serve as an incredible source of power over marginalized groups. I have also realized that my eyes have been blind and my voice morally mute to the oppression that curriculum can represent. It is not just my interpretation of the curriculum or my Eurocentric relatives before me. History, culture, parents, students, the institution and chaos all play enormous roles in curriculum development. I now see curriculum as a social process that involves tensions, unpredictability and changing pedagogical spaces.

My visceral reaction to many of the interviews spoke loudly to me. Aboriginal voice is clear and convincing when it is heard. To be heard, however, a complex array of chaotic factors have to be acknowledged. To have had the opportunity to listen to five First Nations voices has been an incredible gift to me. While many outside observers would consider this number insignificant, I know in my head, and more importantly in my heart, what it meant for the participants to trust me and give me the gift of their time. Many Aboriginal parents today are coping first and foremost with the issues of shelter, safety and nutrition. To create the time and space for me to speak with them about literacy means the world to me. However, I realize it is the two way-ness of the conversations that is important. I also created the time and space to speak with parents.

These discourses have indeed left an imprint on my soul. I now look for, and listen to Aboriginal family gifts. I no longer look through the deficit lens of “needs.” I see how the dimensions of spiritual and emotional literacies can make a difference to pedagogy. The conversations I have had with First Nations parents and teachers has deconstructed my understanding of literacy for all students. These interviews have challenged me to redefine my praxis within the context of (Ab)original literacy.

In addition to what I have learned, I am also left with many lingering questions. What other voices have I omitted in my understanding of lived curriculum? What about student voice? How do I live with the tensions and unpredictability of chaos in my day-to-day experience as a teacher? How can I find the time to continue the dialogue with Aboriginal parents in the future?

As in all meaningful learning adventures, one is left with more questions at the end than before embarking on the journey of understanding.

In conclusion, I have learned that as a teacher I have an incredible response-ability to curriculum development. It is my willingness to face the tensions, ambiguity and multiplicity that will push my thinking and praxis forward. My voice will now join the chorus calling for social, transformative change in Aboriginal literacy education.

Reflections a Year Later

As a primary teacher working in an inner city setting, I wanted to research meaningful ways to include First Nations parents in curriculum development. What I came away with was a transformed/multidimensional view of literacy. Since completing my research, I have discovered all students benefit from this expanded/blurred view of literacy which embraces a multiplicity of literacies and ways of engagement. In terms of future inquiry, I am curious about exploring the concept of “time” as it relates to cultural literacy. I am grateful to the participants in this study for sharing their voices with me.

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