

St. Francis Xavier University

**Untapped Riches:
How Stories of Mi'kmaw Mothers Could Inform
Educational Practices in Public Schools**

by

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School of Education

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Abstract

In this thesis I have recorded the stories of lived experiences of three Mi'kmaw women who are parents of children I taught in a public elementary school. In our conversations, the three mothers speak of themselves as Aboriginal women, dealing with the school system their children attended. In these narratives I also share my stories of our working together in a successful partnership shaped around positive, inclusive, and respectful ways.

I begin the thesis with my personal introduction to parental inclusion in school as a new teacher in a small Northern Canadian Aboriginal community. My inquiry then opens up as I inquire into the positive and negative events in the lives of these three Mi'kmaw women as they story and inquire with me into their children's interactions with schools. The stories of these parents and of their encounters with schools are then laid alongside selected literature which stresses the importance of parental inclusion and participation in the school experiences of children. It is also a literature set that informs readers about the extent of racism faced by Aboriginal parents as they struggle to defend their children against the bureaucratic focus on efficiency in most public schools. I conclude with a discussion of the possibilities for schools and for Mi'kmaw parents. These possibilities include working side by side, both on and off the landscape of school, toward the goals of providing positive learning experiences for Mi'kmaw youth and allowing parents to play an active participatory role.

Dedication

There are so many people who have guided, supported, encouraged and taught me over the course of this research. First and foremost I must dedicate this work to the three women, mothers of children I taught, who willingly shared their stories of struggle and success with me. Without their trust and generosity, this work would not have been possible. I would also like to acknowledge the many parents, mostly mothers who welcomed me into their homes over the years to talk about their children. Many of these parents were so open and so willing to trust. As one mother mentioned to me after I had taught two of her children, “At first, we did not know what to make of you (home visits), we thought you were just coming to see how we live.” I must also acknowledge the support and encouragement of Debbie Pushor who helped me understand the power of parental inclusion. Also, Joanne Tompkins, truly a mentor to me over the years and a woman with incredible knowledge in the field of social justice because she lives it every day.

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Chapter 1

Discovering Parents as Partners

When as a new teacher, I arrived in a Northern Canadian community, little did I realize how much I would learn there. This place and its people have influenced my entire teaching career. In chapter one I describe my learning from the parents and community leaders in Fort Liard and explain how it influenced my subsequent teaching.

Fort Liard: Learning the Importance of Parental Involvement

I can remember my first impression of Fort Liard as it came into view from the window of the small five-seater aircraft that was about to deposit me there. I was in awe of the place; so isolated. It was like nothing I had ever seen before; a small collection of homes and buildings surrounded by countless kilometres of forest and mountains. I was excited and nervous, not knowing what to expect and unsure how I would handle my first teaching assignment. In 1989, Fort Liard, a Dene Community in the Northwest Territories, was a small town of 500 people, with all of the homes in close proximity to the school.

As a new teacher to Echo Dene School, and as mandated by the Local Education Authority (LEA), I was faced with the responsibility of visiting the homes of students who would be in my classroom at the beginning of the school year. This tradition, strongly encouraged by the LEA, was a response by the community to a situation in which teacher turnover was extremely high. Usually teachers were in and out of the community in one or two years. The LEA established this policy because members believed that teachers, new to the community, needed to become familiar with students

and their families quickly. Furthermore, all teachers in the school were from other parts of the country, usually one or two years out of university, with no knowledge of life in a small isolated Northern village. The home visits were a quick and effective way of helping new teachers begin to appreciate the new environment in which they found themselves.

As I reflect on those encounters with families at their homes during my 8 years in Fort Liard, I realize that I learned a great deal about the children. Most homes I visited were very plain dwellings with two or three bedrooms. Some children lived in very small houses with wood heat. All of the homes were in close proximity to the school and all the children walked to class every day. The school itself was a relatively new building with all the amenities.

While walking around the neighbourhood, I was guided by Jane Timbre¹, one of the local people who worked at the school. Jane had a long history in the community as a leader and in the school as a student program assistant. With the benefit of her experience and stories of families, I was able to get first hand knowledge about the children and their home lives. As we made our way from house to house, meeting parents and children, Jane would speak of the students living there, sharing her stories of particular families. I was able to create a history, a narrative, that I could put to each face in the classroom on the first morning of school.

I can remember in those early days of my practice, thinking about students and what their mornings must have been like getting ready for school. As I spent more time in

¹ Pseudonyms have been used for the names of individuals, students, family members, and educators to protect anonymity and confidentiality of all involved with the study.

the community and learned more about the social problems facing many of the people, I began to understand how difficult it was for some children to get to school. The home visits I made at the beginning of the year, each year, helped me to be patient, understanding and considerate of students and families. Through home visits, over time, I began to develop a sense that school performance was significantly impacted by the child's relationships and experiences outside the classroom.

During my first year, I sometimes visited with the parents of students who were having difficulties. Almost always, Jane would come with me, as she was a well-respected and trusted person in the community. I, on the other hand, occupied a different place on the landscape of the community and school. I was “from away,” a white, southern male, a person of whom to be wary. The trust of families was something I had to earn over the years I was teaching in Fort Liard.

As time passed, I became comfortable enough to make home visits on my own. More interestingly, like Pushor (2001) I came to see the value of parent knowledge. Establishing regular communication with parents became an integral part of my practice. For 8 years I grew to know the families in the community and they came to know me. These families became my neighbours and friends, people with whom I hunted, boated, traveled in the bush, watched hockey, feasted with, grieved, and with whom I shared many other aspects of community life.

My experiences of school shared with families in Fort Liard produced what I felt to be close relationships and, very often for me, a strong sense of purpose, accomplishment, and satisfaction. I felt very connected to the students and their families, and these positive feelings further fuelled my desire to build relationships. During my

years in Fort Liard, I became convinced that establishing communication with the home and accessing a parent's knowledge about her child were critical elements in my teaching practice. I believed a commitment to these principles would be invaluable in solving any problem facing a student. As a teacher, I also began to recognize that my first and most important ally in helping a student who was experiencing difficulty was his or her parent. From a social justice perspective, having this relationship with all parents (but particularly with parents of children with academic or behavioural issues, those who are the least advantaged) improved the position of all children in my classroom. Little did I know when I left Fort Liard to teach on the east coast of Canada that I would be putting my beliefs to the test.

Nova Scotia: Incorporating Parental Inclusion

In 1998 I found myself back in Nova Scotia teaching Grade 4 in a primary to grade 6 school. The population served by this school was very different from Fort Liard. This school's population was 75% students of European ancestry, a very small number of children of African ancestry, and the remaining (roughly 20%) students of Mi'kmaw ancestry. The school community also differed dramatically from Fort Liard in terms of geography. This school served a much larger area, and visiting homes presented a greater challenge logistically, and thus was more time consuming. As the academic year started in September of 1998, I had a decision to make about whether or not I would adopt the practice of making home visits.

In this section I explain my experience of introducing the practice of home visits in Nova Scotia; my experiences of putting it to the test, not simply lip service; and my experience of parental inclusion of a parent of school children.

Introducing Parental Contact

Unlike Fort Liard, where personal contact with parents was encouraged, I expected the positioning of teachers and parents in relation to each other to be well defined but very different. I expected to find teachers speaking to parents at scheduled parent/teacher conferences or when the school was experiencing difficulties with a child behaviourally and/or, academically. A home visit by a teacher or an administrator is typically a rare occurrence in most school districts in Nova Scotia. With that in mind, I had to decide if I was going to make home visits and, if so, whether I would visit just the First Nations community or visit all the families of my students. As I mulled over this situation, I wondered what the principal would think about such an enterprise from one of his new teachers. I wondered how my colleagues would react.

In the end, I decided to make home visits and to visit all students' homes, both Native and non-Native. Having contact with parents had become such an important part of my practice and such an important part of who I was as a teacher, I felt it was essential to continue. I firmly believed I should not single out First Nations' families by visiting only on the Reserve. As Cairney and Munsie (1995) point out, the benefits of a positive working relationship between parent and teacher are important for all students.

I talked about my home visitation idea with the principal and told him I was just going to introduce myself because I was new to the school and community. Although he

did not say so, my impression was that he felt the idea was a bit silly. Regardless, he told me I could go ahead. I did not say anything about my plan to colleagues. Again, I was cognizant of the unspoken but clearly defined roles of teacher and parent and the separate domains each occupied on the landscape of schools (see Clandinin & Connelly, 1995). I was stepping outside of the box, and I was quite sure this activity might make some colleagues uncomfortable. I felt it best that I maintain a low profile with respect to this endeavor, so as to not unnecessarily upset my new colleagues.

I sent a letter home with each student announcing my intentions to drop by for a brief visit to introduce myself. I informed parents I would be visiting homes after school during the first part of the month of September. I noted that any parents who were more comfortable making an appointment for me to drop by could do so by indicating on the letter convenient times for possible meetings. Also, any of the families who were uncomfortable with me visiting their home could arrange to meet me at school. I ended the letter by saying that if the note was not returned, or if no preference was given, I would assume it was okay for me to drop by any time after school.

I was very pleased when I received only four notes asking for a meeting at the school. Three parents I encountered by chance at the school. The remaining 16 families welcomed me to visit their homes. Every visit was a positive experience, as parents were receptive, pleased, and curious about my intentions. I was fortunate to be able to visit all of the Mi'kmaw parents, and a couple of families assured me I was the first teacher who had ever visited their home on the Reserve. Many were interested to hear about my work in other First Nations communities.

My sense of how I was perceived by families I visited both, on and off reserve, was one of an educator who approached the teaching of children differently. Those first visits were a curiosity for many parents who, I am sure, wondered about my motives and perhaps what I intended to accomplish. In fact, at the end of the school year, I had an opportunity to discuss this with a mother with whom I had developed a very positive and ongoing working relationship over that first school year. I remember her exact words as we reflected on our initial encounter at her home, “We did not know what to make of you. We thought you were coming around to find out how we lived” (personal communication, 2004).

Establishing this positive contact with parents early in the school year proved to be very beneficial. I was working with one particular child from the reserve who had displayed a marked aversion to daily routine and schoolwork. I discovered she was performing academically two grade levels below grade 4. Even after making major adjustments to her program, Helen still displayed a complete lack of interest in her work. However, when it came to physical education class or fun activities in the classroom, she would participate and apply herself fully.

By the end of September, I had already made two visits to Helen's home. The first, early in September, was the initial introductory meeting. The second visit, while positive, focused on the difficulties Helen and I were experiencing in the class. After the second visit, I felt that a certain level of trust was being established and Helen's mother was very willing to discuss her daughter's work habits.

Putting the Practice into Action, not just Courtesy

Despite my best efforts, by early October, Helen's disruptive behaviour and lack of effort was becoming a serious problem. I made a decision on one particular day that Helen would not be allowed to participate in free time and fun activities in the classroom until she made an effort to do some academic work; work I knew she was capable of doing. By the end of the day, Helen was angry. She told me as she was leaving, that I was a mean teacher, and that she was not coming back to school.

I decided an immediate home visit was necessary. There was no phone at Helen's home, so I arrived on the doorstep unannounced, shortly after school. I asked Helen's mother if I could come in and, to her credit, she invited me to sit. I am sure, without the two previous visits, I would not have been invited to come into the home. It was clear to me from mom's glare that Helen explained to her mother her version of events, and that mom had already decided her daughter would not be going to school the next day.

Helen's mother was upset but reserved. While she worked in the kitchen, I sat at the table and explained my perspective on Helen's behaviour and attitude since my last visit and, in particular, the difficulties of that day. I ended my speech with the comment that I was worried about Helen and very concerned that she was going to miss school. I asked if she had any ideas about how I could help her child have positive experiences in the classroom. To this point, Helen's mother had said very little. Finally, with my question, her input began, not with a rationalization of Helen's behaviour or with berating me, but with the following comment, "Helen will not wear her glasses to school." I had not known Helen required glasses. I responded by suggesting I move her desk closer to the front of the class, and together, we work on finding ways to encourage Helen to wear her glasses. This was agreed to by Helen's mother. Her next suggestion was that Helen

might work harder if she was sitting beside her neighbourhood friend Jessie. To this I readily agreed.

The next 30 minutes of our conversation were a discussion of Helen's work habits and how I managed my classroom. Helen was called out to join her mother and me, which she did reluctantly. My visit ended with Helen's mother assuring me that Helen would be in the classroom the next day. She made it clear to her daughter, in front of me, that she expected a good effort from Helen the next day. She then looked at me and said the following: "Please tell me if she is not doing her work."

I thanked Helen's mother, said goodbye to Helen, and left the meeting feeling very positive about what had transpired. The next day I received a short but wonderful note from Helen's mother which simply said the following: "Mr. Murphy, could you please let Helen stay in for recess today, she has a cold, and thank you for coming to our house yesterday."

When I read the letter, I experienced an intense feeling of appreciation and satisfaction. I could not help but believe this was a significant event in the partnership beginning to develop between Helen's mother and myself. Helen worked much better that day and I wrote a positive note about her work, showed it to her, and sent it home to her mother. Over the course of the school year, Helen performed very well. We certainly had our days which were less productive than I preferred, and I did have to make the occasional follow up visit. Good work was often rewarded with a positive note home, and Helen began to see herself as a learner as she started to make significant gains in her skills and abilities.

As the coming months proved, Helen's knowledge of the fact that her mother and

me were working closely together and sharing information had a transforming effect on her performance and behaviour. Helen's mother appreciated the fact I asked for her opinion about issues that impacted Helen's program. I think she recognized that act as one of respect, and she understood I really valued her input. In my mind, this experience added further, powerful evidence of the value of parent knowledge and the importance of parents' participation in the daily school life of their children.

Being a Parent in the Public School System—Seeing the Other Side

An epiphany in my thinking on the issue of parental involvement, communication, and meaningful input into schooling occurred when my son Ray began grade primary in September of 1998. At that point I became a parent of a child in the public school system. During my first few interactions with my son's teacher, it was clear I was expected to drop him off at school and trust that the teacher would take care of all his needs. I was uncomfortable with that assumption on the part of his teacher. I found that there seemed to be a real problem for her when I became too inquisitive, as a parent, as to the structure of my son's day program. My sense was these are questions a parent is not supposed to ask; something Benson (1999) points out as being a widespread phenomena.

From that point on, I began to think about the work I was doing with families as an educator and those parents' stories of school, comparing them to my experiences and my parent stories of school, and my feelings of being marginalized and powerless as a parent of a school age child. The stories of parents with whom I had worked took on a whole new meaning as I reflected on what my family was experiencing.

I became very interested in the topic of *parents' perspective*. I began to wonder, what is the position of parents on the landscape of schools (Pushor, 2001; Pushor & Murphy, 2004). Could parents participate more fully in a positive and productive way, in partnership with teacher and school? Did other educators, besides my son's teacher, put up walls around parents and make them feel unwanted and unimportant? How had my experiences, as a teacher trying to empower parents, impacted on how I interacted with Ray's teachers and school? My questions caused me to think further about how intimidated and powerless other parents must feel who do not have my experience with school or who are marginalized members of society. When interacting with the school system, as advocates for their children, how are these parents storied? Are they labeled as meddling, interfering, or smothering? Do they alienate teachers? Does their active involvement serve to alienate them from teachers?

Learning from Practice

Over the past 4 years, I witnessed many other examples of the benefits of establishing communication and working relationships with parents as I continued my efforts to establish contact and communication between home and school. The results, I feel, have been a deeper knowledge base upon which I can develop and facilitate better programming, which in turn leads to improved performance by students. Parents comment time and time again on what it meant to them to have a voice, to find someone involved in the education of their children who is interested in what *they* have to say.

I often think about Helen and her mother and about what would have happened to Helen had I not made that visit. It would have been typical, I suppose, to continue to try

and coerce Helen into doing her work, or to continuously "dumb down" her program in hopes that she would participate in academic activities in the classroom. I firmly believe that, in Helen's case, empowering her mother—giving her mother a voice, giving her mother an opportunity to play an active role in Helen's school life—became a positive influence in Helen's school experience. My close communication with Helen's mother improved the family's relationship with and attitude toward school. It also enabled me, as an educator, to know more fully the factors that explained Helen's initial reluctance to participate.

Storying the Literature Review

Reflecting on my 14 years as a teacher and 7 years as a parent of school-aged children, I began to see how events in my professional and personal life culminated in a need to understand the nature and value of the parents' role in the education of their children. I have become very interested in what Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler (1997), and Hoover-Dempsey and Jones (1997) call "the parent role construction" and what I like to refer to as the position of parents on the landscape of school. To that end, I chose to explore more fully the stories of three Mi'kmaq mothers who have children attending provincial schools. I wanted to hear the manner in which their role as parents, and as Aboriginal parents, had been constructed by the school. To understand their stories better, I first reviewed existing literature and topics of schools, of landscapes, of parental involvement and role construction by school community, particularly in relation to Aboriginal parents.

School as a Landscape

Landscape refers to the central focus of this research—in this case, three Mi'kmaq mothers' stories, my stories of our experiences with public school, and the context in which these stories take place. "Landscape of school" is defined as a three dimensional narrative context of space, time, and place where people, things, and events interact (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). The boundaries of this landscape, with respect to the first dimension of space, are marked out by the personal and social interactions of these women and myself with schools. This includes my personal opinions, beliefs, and epiphanies; the stories I share; and the stories these women share with me. The second dimension concerns temporal issues, as my co-researchers and I move backwards and forwards through time through the telling of our stories. The third dimension relates to place, the physical, where stories are shared and where experiences have occurred, such as at home, at school, on a bus, in a principal's office, or at a school board meeting (to name a few). Parents, teachers, and administrators live their lives on this landscape; they shape the landscape and the landscape shapes them (Clandinin & Connelly, 1995).

Position is defined as where research participants (Mi'kmaq mothers and myself) are, in relation to this landscape of schools (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). As parents, are we an integral part of what schooling is, partners and decision makers? Are we positioned on the fringe of this landscape—on the outside looking in, with no part to play? Are some parents in a more privileged position than others?

Parents on the School Landscape

Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler (1997) and Hoover-Dempsey and Jones (1997) argue that decisions by parents (most often mothers) to become involved in their children's education are influenced by three factors. The first factor is the perception of a parent about what they are supposed to do for their children to help them achieve education outcomes. The second element pertains to the extent to which the parents believe they can have a positive influence on their children's performance in school. The third element is the degree to which both children and the school welcome, invite, and/or demand the participation of parents in school.

The extent to which each of these constructs affects the decisions of parents to become involved or not involved in their children's school lives is, in turn, predicated on a number of factors, which include family income, education, and ethnicity (Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1997). The implications are that the higher the income and education of the parents, the more involved they become, and thus the higher the achievement of educational outcomes by their children.

Parents with higher incomes, higher education, and belonging to the dominant ethnic and racial groups see a larger role for themselves as advocates for their children with the school. They perceive their interventions as being helpful to the child in achieving educational outcomes. Also, with respect to this parent demographic, schools are more inviting of parents' participation (Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1997; Hoover-Dempsey & Jones, 1997).

Another important factor identified by Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler (1997) concerned the peer group to which parents belonged. If the peer group had high expectations for parent participation in schools, then parents tended to display a similar

propensity for involvement, and vice versa.

Epstein (1995) argues that the way schools care about children is reflected in the way schools care about families. Parental involvement is a function of the extent to which families and schools work together in partnership. Frequent interaction among schools, families, and community results in students recognizing the importance of school, of working hard, of being creative, and of achieving educational outcomes. The greater the partnership, the more likely a "caring community" (Epstein, p. 1) will develop. Within this model of a caring community Epstein notes that parents, teachers, and administrators work together continually to improve student achievement. Unless schools and teachers work to develop and maintain opportunities for interaction among school, community, and parents the partnership declines.

Epstein (1995) also notes that affluent communities have more positive family involvement with schools. This last point ties in with Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler's (1997) position that socio-economic status and parent peer group expectations of involvement are important factors in parents' participation in and partnership with schools.

Constructing Roles on the School Landscape

Laying the concepts of parent position in relation to the landscape of school and parent/school partnership alongside my experiences as a teacher of Aboriginal youth and as a parent of school aged children, some interesting issues arise. In my experience, in my roles as teacher and parent, I rarely see examples of the kind of partnership Epstein (1995) writes about. I would argue many administrators and teachers are apprehensive

about encouraging parents to participate beyond, for example, the hot dog program, fund raising, or volunteering in the library. Parent input, I suggest, is not welcome when it comes to discussions about curriculum, programming, staffing, cultural inclusion, issues around diversity, or the achievement expectations of children (Benson, 1999; Shockely, Michalove, & Allen, 1995).

As a parent, I am frustrated that I am expected to avoid probing questions about my child's program, that this is somehow the sphere or domain of the school and not a legitimate concern of mine as a parent. This position would be more palatable to me if I was confident that someone or some system was in place to ensure my children are being exposed to a learning environment that is positive, affirming, structured to meet curriculum outcomes, and which challenges my children at their ability level. However, as a teacher, I know about time restrictions and other pressures on administrators, which result in a lack of monitoring of programming in classrooms.

Aboriginal Parents on the School Landscape

With respect to the idea of parent role construction put forth by Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler (1997) and Hoover-Dempsey and Jones (1997), I wonder to what extent Aboriginal parents feel a sense of efficacy and a sense of place in public school? What do Mi'kmaq mothers see as their position in relation to the education of their children? Does the education system want or invite their involvement? The literature suggests the answer to this last question is *no*; schools are not welcoming to Aboriginal parents.

The statistics documented in the literature paint a bleak picture of the experiences of Aboriginal peoples with public school. As documented in the report from the Royal

Commission on Aboriginal People (1996), almost one-half of Aboriginal students across the country drop out. The reasons Aboriginal students are dropping out are due to low expectations of teachers, poor tracking of First Nation students, few Native teachers, and a disregard by public schools for diversity in content and assessment standards (Cleary & Peacock, 1997). There are low levels of participation in schools on the part of Aboriginal parents. Aboriginal people often resist becoming involved in their children's education because administrators do not ask them for guidance and advice. The historical relationship of viewing Aboriginal families as an impediment to assimilation carries forth into the present day where the relationship between Aboriginal parents and public schools is most often hostile and exclusionary (Cummins, 2001). Because of this, public schools remain psychologically closed to Aboriginal parents (Friedel, 1999). Robintson-Zanartu and Majel-Dixon (1996) note public schools are "alien" to Aboriginal children. Public schools do not encourage Aboriginal core values of sharing, of being other-centred, of harmony with nature, of non-interference, of patience, of circular time, of non-confrontation, or of a broad view of family (Coggins, Williams, & Radin, 1997).

I often hear from some colleagues and some other education stakeholders, "Native parents don't care about how well their children do in school." Perhaps this comment is a completely erroneous assumption. Perhaps the core issue is how, we as teachers, facilitate the participation of Aboriginal parents in the public school experience of their children in a fair, meaningful, respectful, and culturally relevant way.

The Research Puzzle

Increased parent communication with the teacher has a positive impact on a student's performance (Epstein, 1995; Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1997; Friedel, 1999). However, in my own professional experience, I have seen very little interest on the part of schools to actively encourage parents to share what they perceive as their child's strengths, hopes, and aspirations for school. There is rarely a sincere attempt on the part of schools to develop meaningful partnerships with families for the benefit of students' behaviour and/or academic performance. Often, the extent of parental participation in decisions affecting a child's school life is limited to meetings where parents are informed of the school's plans to improve their academic performance or behaviour, or with such activities as fund-raising for new playground equipment, or asking for volunteers for field trips (Shockely, Michalove, & Allen; 1995). Communication is a monologue *at* parents rather than a dialogue *with* them.

Focus of the Research

The research I embarked upon centered around the stories told by Mi'kmaw parents. As I planned the research, I wanted to learn about their experiences with the school system. I wanted to listen for parents' beliefs about the position they felt they should occupy in their children's school lives, about how effective they believe they have been in improving academic performance and achievement, and about the extent to which they feel welcomed by the schools their children attended.

A key focus of this inquiry is attempting to understand what the word *welcomed* means (Pushor, 2001). Welcomed where? Into the realm of the classroom, the school? Welcomed how? As an observer or as a respected partner? Welcomed by whom? The

school board, the administration, or the teacher? Who has ownership of this place we call school and what is the position of parents, particularly Mi'kmaw parents, on this landscape?

Significance of the Research

This research is significant for three reasons. First, there is a perception that many Aboriginal parents do not care about their children's school experiences. Hearing the stories of Aboriginal parents about their experiences with their children's schooling should enlarge and unsettle the theoretical conversations around this phenomenon. Second, stories of Aboriginal parents who have become effectively involved in their children's education may move teachers to rethink their assumptions about the position of Aboriginal parents on the landscape of school. Third, identifying issues of concern to Aboriginal parents should have implications for schools and for the school boards responsible for the operation of provincial public schools that serve Mi'kmaw communities.

The knowledge system that is in place in provincial public schools that Mi'kmaw students attend, appears to silence Mi'kmaw ways of knowing and learning. The question which needs to be asked is whether or not anything has changed since the days of the residential school system. To put it bluntly, do provincial public schools need to greatly improve the programming they are offering Aboriginal students and families? Listening to the stories, voices, and perspectives of those closest to Mi'kmaw students—their families—should better inform educational practice.

Chapter Two

Shaping the Research Story: Methodology and Process

Aboriginal parents try to understand a public school system that very often places a low value on their concerns or voice when it comes to decisions affecting their children. What have been the lived experiences of these parents over the course of their interaction

with the school system? What can I as a teacher/researcher learn from the stories of these lived experiences with respect to parents' position on the landscapes of schools? To answer these questions, I have chosen to do qualitative research.

I chose qualitative research because of the nature of the puzzle outlined in chapter 1. I wanted a research methodology that was sensitive to the emerging underlying meaning I recorded in the stories of parents as I laid the experiences beside my own (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Merriam, 1998). The rich and data-laden stories of parents' lived experiences, as they retell of their interactions with teachers and schools, allow me to develop an understanding of what it was like for these individuals as parents of Aboriginal children in public schools. Themes I looked for in the data were: did these Mi'kmaq mothers see a role for themselves in school? Had they been effective in advocating for their children? Did they believe schools (i.e., teachers and administrators) valued their participation?

Narrative Inquiry

Narrative inquiry is a qualitative methodology that provided a good fit for my research journey. At its heart is a way of deeply listening and exploring the stories people tell as they make sense of their experiences. Narrative inquiry allowed me to attend to the stories of Aboriginal parents through the lens of my own experiences as teacher and parent.

Narrative inquiry is a way of understanding experience. It is collaboration between researcher and participants, over time, in a place or series of places, and in social interaction with milieus. An inquirer enters this matrix in the

midst and progresses in this same spirit, concluding the inquiry still in the midst of living and telling, reliving and retelling, the stories and experiences that makes up people's lives. ... narrative inquiry is stories lived and told.

(Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 20)

Using narrative inquiry, I heard, recorded, and attended to the stories of parents of Aboriginal children in public schools. This process permitted me to conduct my research in a way that reflected the parents' perspective; it gave a stage for the stories of their experiences as the parents of school aged children.

Entering into the Core of Stories

The three Mi'kmaw mothers, Stacey, Jane, and Tammy, were my co-researchers. By sharing my own stories as a parent and a teacher with them, I employed a two way process. I was not being an expert or producer of knowledge about parents and their experiences. I wanted to do research which was based on relationship with parents, to create a forum where our stories could be shared similar to Benson's (1999) suggested process.

The use of narrative inquiry as a way to understand the stories of Aboriginal parents is, I think, a good fit and an appropriate methodology for this study. Storytelling is a strong tradition among Aboriginal people. Therefore, with respect to Aboriginal research, using a narrative approach is deemed culturally appropriate (Friesen & Orr, 1998).

Clandinin and Connelly (2000) speak of a three-dimensional narrative inquiry space. As a narrative inquirer, I needed to learn to think narratively. I needed to listen

carefully to the stories of lives lived and to position my inquiry in the metaphorical three-dimensional space of which Clandinin and Connelly speak. The first dimension refers to the personal and social aspects of interaction between participant and researcher. The mothers I interviewed had children who had been in my classroom. I had been their child's teacher; however when this research was conducted I was no longer teaching them. As a researcher, I hoped to build on the existing relationships of friendship and trust I had developed, as I recorded the stories of the parents and laid those experiences beside my own. I was looking for aspects of narrative that shed light on how their personal interactions with schools had affected their experiences as parents of school aged children. Also, how those interactions shaped parents' attitude toward partnerships with schools.

The second dimension of narrative inquiry refers to its temporal aspects (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Our stories and experiences from the past impact on our present relationships, both of which influence future interactions. Storying past experiences and discussing how those experiences shape one's posture towards partnership with school, now and in the future, is a central focus in the research.

The third dimension is the idea of place; the environment in which we as parents and parent/researcher, find ourselves (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Specifically, with respect to the positioning of Aboriginal parents on the landscape of schools, much of the current research reflects the lack of participation by Aboriginal families in their children's schooling. Schools have been and remain closed to Aboriginal parents (Friedel 1999). In fact, Native students and families often experience a school system that is alien to them, a system that reflects very little of their language and culture (Battiste, 1999; Coggins,

Williams & Robin, 1997; Nicholas, 2001). In parents' stories, I was looking for clues as to why those walls are there and what we can learn about that which keeps parents away from school.

Negotiating Relationships

I engaged in separate research conversations with each of the three Mi'kmaw mothers, at least three times over the course of a three-month period. The first Mi'kmaw mother I interviewed was Stacey, whose daughter, Darlene, had been a student in my class. As a concerned parent with many dealings with school over the years, she welcomed me into her space as we worked together to help a child who had many difficulties in school. Stacey had a wealth of experience defending her children in the public school system. The second mother, Jane, was also a parent of a child I had taught. Her son Gary was the youngest in the family and was, much later in his school life, diagnosed with a learning disability. The third mother was Tammy, and we had developed a relationship when I taught her daughter Kathy.

My first research conversation with each mother involved the telling of her general life history. This allowed each woman to contextualize her life and helped me to better understand her position in relationship to schooling. The second conversation focused on my asking each mother to say more about significant events which arose from the life history telling and which relate to the research puzzle. In our third meeting, I explored with participants the retellings of their stories, rich with new possibilities for Aboriginal parents on the school landscape (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Creswell, 1998; Seidman, 1991).

Stories from Stacey, Jane, and Tammy were collected in conversation and tape recorded. To elicit each of their stories of parents, I allowed them the opportunity to freely reflect on and respond to their experiences, discussed my own experiences with them, and had the flexibility to vary the questions to fit their context and stories. This process resulted in conversations (rather than simple questions and answers), which began to reveal the underlying meaning of their experiences. In order to give the details of their experiences, (a beginning, a middle, and an end) people must reflect on their experience. Similarly, Seidman (1991) emphasizes it is this process of selecting details of experience, reflecting on them, giving them order and thereby making sense of them that makes telling stories a meaning-making experience.

The process of creating field texts proceeded as participants told stories in conversation. On a daily basis, I transcribed these field texts, read and reread what I had collected, and began to compose the research text. Reading and rereading the field texts allowed me to "narratively code" (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 131) them as I moved back and forth from intimate contact with participants to examination, reflection, and analysis of transcripts. It allowed me to step back from the text and try to connect it to the larger literature. As I inquired into the stories research wonders began to arise (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000), and I was able to probe into these wonders in subsequent conversations.

Choosing the place where each mother was comfortable to engage in conversation was very important in that I wanted parents to feel as relaxed and as comfortable as possible. Given the historical positioning of schools as assimilating places for Aboriginal peoples, I understood the need to move the research away from that site. Therefore,

stories were shared in parents' homes, because this is where I had always met with them in the past to discuss their children. I felt that conversing with parents in their homes, rather than at the school or some other unfamiliar place, would produce richer narratives. I collected the narratives on ground belonging to them rather than the school.

I made every attempt to ensure my personal interactions with Stacey, Jane and Tammy were respectful, non-judgmental, and non-threatening (Merriam, 1998). This is a challenge at the best of times, but considering that I was working across differences of race, class, and gender I needed to be even more careful of how my presence might influence the research.

My Own Location in this Study

Tuhiwai Smith (1999), a Maori scholar who has done a great deal to describe and define indigenous research, explains that the process of doing research with Aboriginal people must take into account such considerations as location, historical positioning, and relationality. As a researcher, I need to define my location and position in the study as a white male teacher/researcher. My race, my gender, and my formal positions as teacher and graduate student gave me a considerable degree of power in the relationships with these women. One strategy that I used to attempt to redress this power imbalance was through careful listening and rechecking taped conversations. I had to be careful of some of the trappings involved as a cross-cultural researcher—particularly assuming the role of white *saviour*, *missionary*, and *rescuer*. I did not want my research to continue the legacy of colonization. Rather, I wanted to use a decolonizing methodology (Smith, 1999). I needed to be fully aware of this, and in every interaction I

tried to simultaneously diminish my own voice and amplify the voices of my co-researchers. It was a constant challenge, for as Corson (1997) states, it takes a great deal of work to come to see our social location and, when we become aware of it, to act in ways to diminish our over privileged positions. “We cannot easily see the world from the point of view of most other people, because they are positioned very differently from ourselves by their experiences; and we are taking risks if we assume our different culture positions are compatible or even mutually understandable” (p. 105). During my graduate program I consciously sought out researchers whose ideas challenged me on issues of power and privilege (Fine, Weiss, & Powell, 1997; Lee, 1994; McIntosh, 1990).

Luckily I believe my relationship with Tammy, Stacey, and Jane prior to our research, helped to rebalance and ground our research. Having worked beside them as I worked with their children, and having created, with their help, programs that allowed their children to achieve a considerable degree of success in school, gave me a certain degree of credibility. I argue that our relationships were meaningful, and I sensed throughout the research that our conversations were honest, deep, and respectful. Battiste (2005) and Smith (1999) speak of the tremendous importance of relationship in research with Aboriginal people. Kirkness and Barnhardt (1991) have outlined the four R's of respect, relevance, reciprocity, and relationship that should guide research with Aboriginal people; I attempted to be mindful of these in my interactions and interpretations with the research.

Authenticity

I wondered as I proceeded with this research whether my representation of stories and experiences were authentic? Would they represent reality, particularly given that realities are socially constructed and considering the danger of cross-cultural misinterpretation? Was there a danger that I would simply continue in the colonizing research that appropriates and misrepresents Aboriginal voices (Smith, 1999)?

Credibility

It was important that I, and others, have confidence in the credibility and ethical conduct of the inquiry. My research texts needed to be credible representations of my experiences as parent/teacher/researcher and also credible representations of the stories of parent participants. These questions related to the issue of wakefulness on the part of the researcher, particularly in a cross cultural context in which I held a great deal of power and privilege. This constant state of wakefulness to issues of authenticity, adequacy, plausibility, and credibility of the study is the responsibility of the researcher (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). It is heightened the more one works across difference. Readers of narrative inquiry need to be confident of the plausibility and the credibility of the stories being told. The issues and revelations that emerge from stories told and experiences shared are credible only to the degree I attend to the authenticity of the research. I needed to be engaged in ongoing reflection, to be wakeful and thoughtful of all my narrative inquiry decisions (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000) and to always be cognizant of the socio-political and sociohistorical backdrop which frames this research. The constant back and forth between conversations, texts, and conversations between Stacey, Jane, Tammy, and me and the depth of our relationships helped to create the space for their voices to rise. I

feel that there was a safe space created where they could and did challenge my interpretations of our conversations.

I believe the richness and depth I unearthed from the narratives of parent participants, led to the plausibility and credibility of this research. As the parents shared their experiences with me, it also encouraged my attending to this state of wakefulness. The more research conversations I engaged in, the more robust my understanding became.

Ethical Considerations

There were many ethical considerations that I needed to be mindful of throughout the course of my study. Many have already been addressed in the section on issues related to cross-cultural research. I needed to be constantly aware of the complex and potentially dangerous terrain I walk as a non-Aboriginal researcher working with Aboriginal people. Battiste (1999), Kirkness and Barndhardt (1991), and Smith (1999) helped to make me mindful of the need for constant scrutiny, dialogue and perception checks.

Protecting the anonymity of my participants was a high priority. Pseudonyms have been used for all individuals, parents, place names, institutions, and events that risk revealing the identification of the participants or their families. The usual protocol of securing informed consent, advising participants of their ability to opt out, and careful handling of research data were minimum standards which I established in my work (see Appendix A). However, I sought to ensure that these were nested in the larger issues of working ethically and respectfully across differences.

I had to be mindful that my purpose as researcher was understand experience by listening to stories, not to harm individuals by stirring painful memories (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Merriam, 1998). Talking about their experiences related to school was sometimes difficult for Stacey, Jane, and Tammy; therefore I had to be sensitive to their emotions. I had to know how and when to be empathetic and honouring of the pain that is so much a part of the colonizing experience. My previously established relationship and my *knowing over time* allowed me to be aware of their comfort or discomfort. This could not have been possible, I believe, if I had gone into this research not knowing these women.

Transforming My Research Plan into Action

As I reflected on the initial research plan I had laid out, I needed to remember that it was just that, a plan. It was a plan that was subject to change as the study progressed. As Merriam (1998) reminds researchers, “Qualitative research is not a linear, step-by-step process. Data collection and analysis is a simultaneous activity in qualitative research” (p. 151). The taped conversations caused me to evaluate my plan to more effectively attend to the awakenings that I discovered and shared. As I journeyed forward in this research, I came to rely on my instinct, growing knowledge of research techniques, literature review, peers and advisors, and the parent participants themselves to let me know if and when a change in the plan was warranted. Increasingly, I grew to trust my hunches in our research.

As I inquired into the stories that Stacey, Jane, and Tammy told, ideas seemed to organize themselves around three overarching topics. In chapter 3, I examine

communication between home and school, and discuss how what is taken for granted in many communities as a fundamental cornerstone of parent/teacher relationships is absent in the experience of these three mothers. In chapter 4, I present stories of how these Mi'kmaw women are positioned on the school landscape in ways that blame and shame them. Chapter 5 examines how the school attempts to make sense out of its seeming inability to serve Mi'kmaw children. Finally in Chapter 6, I step out of this specific research puzzle and examine the broader implications for making space for more authentic and meaningful forms of Aboriginal self determination.

Chapter 3

Communication Between School and Home

Communication and sharing information are keystones in building relationships, but they are even more important when one considers relationships which have become so terribly unbalanced through the process of colonization. It is critical to have

expectations that are not one sided, that are not top-down, or that are not unidirectional, teacher to parent. I begin by pointing out how communication is a cornerstone for building educational relationships. I then relate stories told by each of the mothers that illustrate that meaningful, decolonizing communication is missing from most of the interactions First Nations parents have with their children's schools

Communication as a Cornerstone of Building Relationship

The majority of public schools serving Aboriginal students in Canada (see Nicholas, 2001; Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, 1996) have had limited success in supporting the success of Aboriginal students. Similarly, many, if not most, Mi'kmaq parents do not feel welcome in public schools. Mi'kmaw parents do not feel included as partners in their children's education (Task Force on Educational Services to Students of the Afton First Nation Community, 2000 [hereafter referred to as Task Force, 2000]). One needs only to refer to the Task Force report to acknowledge that there needs to be positive relationships built between parents and teachers, and between the community and the school. Numerous statements and observations from teachers and parents included in the Task Force report indicate that communication between home and school is critically important to building and maintaining relationships—for example: “Teachers need to understand Mi'kmaq culture and expectations. They need to know Mi'kmaw people. They need to be in relationship with individuals. There needs to be community in the school and the school in the community”(p___)

Our research conversations show Jane's Stacey's and Tammy's sincere interest in the educational experiences of their children. Stacey, Jane and Tammy all related that

they wanted communication between themselves and their children's teachers. Most often they were frustrated with the lack of sharing and contact, and were also frustrated with the nature of the exchanges when information was relayed to them. Often parents were told or informed of their children's poor academic performance or of their children's behaviour issues well after the fact. Jane, Stacey, and Tammy expressed their profound frustration with not knowing, in a timely manner, about problems their children were having. Often, they found out about difficulties at report card time or when a child was on the verge of being suspended.

Apart from the time their children were in my classroom, Jane, Stacey, and Tammy did not speak of one incident when administrators or teachers spoke of their children in a positive manner. As Jane stated, "*The school keeps feeding you negativity*" (research conversation, date, p). In the remainder of this thesis I use italics rather than quotation marks to indicate Jane's, Stacey's and Tammy actual words transcribed from interviews

Stacey's Story

Stacey clearly wanted communication with the school. She recognized that her daughter was having difficulty meeting curriculum outcomes. She understood that her daughter's frustration with a lack of success with the work was resulting in behaviour problems. Stacey was also troubled by the deterioration in her child's relationships with her teachers.

Stacey tried to be proactive, inviting the sharing of information, opening the door to communication between herself and the teacher. She explained, *I have always told the*

teachers, I give them my home number, and I give them my number at work ... if there is a problem they should let me know.

Stacey felt that knowing what was happening with her children in school was important for their success. She welcomed and demanded communication. Yet, despite her invitation for open sharing of information related to her child, she was frustrated when she would only receive word of her daughter's difficulties at report card time. She expressed her profound frustration with the lack of communication from the school.

And I am so shocked when I open the report card and it's like your daughter is in danger of failing. Like... to me, if there is a problem, they should let me know. They say, "Well, we'll do it in school." No that's not what it is all about.

The implications of the "Well, we'll do it in school" expressed by teachers and administrators, either overtly or subtly, are obvious. Stacey feels that teachers are uncomfortable dealing with Mi'kmaw parents. Her story shows that teachers often, maybe without meaning to or without knowing it, place Aboriginal parents in a different place on the school landscape than they do mainstream parents. The stories which follow will continue to show that Stacey believes it is because teachers' and administrators' expectations for achievement by Aboriginal students are so low that their expectations of the positive participation of Aboriginal parents are also low. Stacey shows that Aboriginal parents are often categorized as uninterested, uncaring, or unable to help their child. Aboriginal parents may also be considered difficult and hostile simply because they tend to question decisions or plans made by the school regarding their children. For many teachers, it appears, a questioning parent is a threat to their power.

Only when Stacey's daughter was on the verge of being suspended from school, did Stacey receive a call about her daughter's situation. She was very clear when describing her anger and disappointment. *I was pretty upset because I said [to the administrator] you know, why did you let it escalate that far...where all you had to do was to give me a call at home.* The simple act of picking up the phone and calling Stacey in to discuss her daughter's situation could have been the beginning of trust building, of dealing with the child's issues early on, and of providing a teacher with a mother's support. That opportunity was never realized.

Stacey's story shows that this was a typical pattern for Stacey and all her children in school, but most particularly with Darlene. Teachers or administrators would not call unless it was absolutely necessary. Parent input and participation was not welcomed when it came to pre-identification of behaviour issues or dealing with academic problems experienced by Darlene. There was no interest in having input from Stacey regarding the educational plan for Darlene. The idea of partnering with Stacey to create home based incentives for Darlene's positive behaviour in school was never explored. As a result, continued poor performance on the report card ensued, and suspension was averted only at the last minute.

Stacey explained during our conversations that she noticed a profound change in her relationship with school when Darlene became my student. Darlene's experience in my class represented a marked difference, in a very positive way, from her experiences in the lower grades. Similarly, Stacey experienced a different way of doing business with the school. When we worked together as teacher and parent, Stacey came to see that her voice, her opinions, her concerns were welcomed and included in planning Darlene's

program. For the first time in her experience as a Mi'kmaq parent, Stacey felt partnership. This affected Stacey's expectations on how teachers should and could work with her in the future. She explained:

Back when you were teaching her... it made me feel like wow, I have a teacher here that really cares about my daughter... where he is not going to pass her because he feels that oh, okay, you're going to be shoved along the school system. And that makes me feel good because my point is, like I said, I am really glad that we have teachers that really care and they are concerned about what level a child is in. And like I said, communicating back and forth, I find that essential.

It is important to note that Stacey claims the communication and relationship Stacey shared and experienced with me was profoundly different from any she has had before or since. I visited Stacey at the beginning of the year to introduce myself and began the trust building and partnership. The result of the visit and subsequent communication was a relationship that benefited Stacey as parent, her daughter as a student, and me as the teacher of a child with academic difficulties and a history of behaviour issues.

Including Stacey in decisions that affected Darlene benefited all the three of us. Stacey's intimate knowledge of her daughter's attitude, aptitude, moods, and previous school experience was an untapped gift for an educator. As a teacher, I had ready access to information and home support from Stacey when I needed it. Stacey was also willing to communicate to Darlene that Darlene was expected to give her best effort in class, to listen to, and show respect for me as a teacher. Darlene benefited from the consistent and persistent attention to her needs by her teacher and the modifications to her academic

program and behaviour plan. I believe that Darlene came to appreciate the structure of her program and the academic success she eventually experienced.

Arguably, Stacey experienced the most profound benefit. In me she found an educator who valued her parent knowledge. A teacher who not only valued Stacey's knowledge of and experiences with her own daughter, but also an educator who made use of her insights and opinions on Darlene's school history. I believe that this new connection with Darlene's life lived in school was empowering for Stacey, and it eventually became something of a stress reliever for her. She came to count on the fact that I would contact her for her support or if I needed information about Darlene. Over the course of the school year, this partnership evolved, strengthened, and produced wonderful results for Stacey, Darlene, and me as teacher.

Tammy's Story

The pattern of Mi'kmaq parents wanting to know what is happening in school and being frustrated with the lack of communication was a recurring theme in Tammy's story of school. Tammy longed to have communication with her daughter's teachers. I made contact with Tammy when her daughter was in my grade 4 class. Over time she came to view this relationship as successful and beneficial. It was a partnership that worked well for her and her daughter. When we spoke in our research conversations, Tammy stated that she longed again for that level of communication with her daughter's teachers: *I feel that teachers should be able to pick up the phone or whatever and go see the parent and say, "look, I am Kathy's grade 9 teacher, I'll be teaching her this year" ...whatever. We would be just breaking the barrier between us.*

Tammy's experiences with the communication between herself, the school, administrators, and teachers were very similar to Stacey's. Included were the accompanying frustrations, sense of hopelessness, and anger. Communication would only happen during report card time, and those sessions were usually one sided affairs with little input on her part. Tammy also expressed frustration with the lack of openness and sharing and the fact that she would only hear from the school if her daughter was experiencing serious problems. Even then the communication often would not be with the teachers, but rather relayed second hand through the administrator.

This experience of Aboriginal parents not having access or communication with the classroom teacher was common for Stacey and as was also evident here with Tammy as well. Like Stacey, report card time would often be the only time Tammy would actually speak to the teacher.

These stories illustrate that there seem to be two equally unproductive stereotypical myths of Aboriginal parents by non-Aboriginal educators. The first is belief that Mi'kmaw parents simply do not care about or value education, and hence it is not worth initiating communication with the families of Mi'kmaw students (Pushor & Murphy, 2004; Task Force, 2000). The second is that Mi'kmaq parents who are not indifferent are hostile or uppity, difficult, unrealistic, and unreasonable (Pushor & Murphy, 2004). In my opinion, both views keep educators from having meaningful relationships with parents; because they lead them to conclude that parents will be of no help or they will be a burden. There seems to be no alternative position which acknowledges the richness that parent knowledge and parent relationship could bring to the classroom. Parents, it appears, have no power. Mi'kmaw parents, because of their

sociohistorical and sociopolitical positioning in relation to schools have even less power than other parents.

As Tammy stated, most teachers wouldn't even lift a finger to call to tell you their child is doing great or doing bad. If they were doing badly, they would get the administration to do it. It was clearly Tammy's experience that sometimes she would not even have the opportunity to speak with the teacher when her daughter was having difficulty. She would have to negotiate to get the information she wanted through a third party, the vice principal. This was an additional power imbalance in her relationship with the school. Having to deal through the administration created an admonishing tone to the interaction. It was as if both Tammy and her daughter were being reprimanded.

Tammy also acknowledged that the relationship she had with me was very different from the experiences she had with previous teachers. Like Stacey, Tammy's relationship with me was unlike any she had before. I was open with her, communicated with her, and went to her home to discuss her daughter's academic program and behaviour issues. She explained, *Oh yeah because most teachers wouldn't lift a finger to call... But when you first did [came to the reserve to another parent's house] it's like, yeah, I thought you were kind of crazy, but then I said, No, maybe he is doing a good thing, cause he will know where we're coming from and whatever.*

As with Stacey, and as with most families of my students, I made a home visit with Tammy at the beginning of the year. Over the course of the year, Tammy would work with me to reinforce positive habits related to Kathy's school work, and she would let me know if there were any issues outside of the school, on the Reserve, or with family

that could have an impact on her daughter's school performance. Tammy appreciated the benefits of regular communication with her daughter's teacher.

When you had her the first time... we always had that communication ... it was mostly good because she tended to know that we were getting along. So I can't frig up because he's going to call my mother.

The home visits and the consistent communication between home and school had profound and positive effects on the families whose children were in my classes, as Tammy expressed: *But with us, it was totally different because I did get to meet you, you know which was better in the long run. Because a lot of kids look up to you, compared to other teachers that have been there for years and years... because you tend to get more involved with the student.*

These relationships between Tammy and me and between Stacey and me evolved over time. We all came to know and respect each other. By sharing space with parents I was able to access their prior knowledge and experience related to their child, from which I could make professional decisions on expectations and program design for each child. This deeper knowing allowed me to see greater opportunities for making curricular connections with my Mi'kmaq students. By so doing, I increased the relevance of what they were doing and they in turn became motivated and affirmed in their work. An upward spiral of success began to unfold.

Jane's Story

Jane spoke to me of a situation with her son and the school that strongly illustrated the lack of communication between parent and teacher:

Do you know this boy here? He's sat outside of his classroom for 7 months before we realized that's where he was sitting. And I went into parent-teacher meetings, and I was not even told by the teacher. Finally my daughter mentioned it one day; and she said, "Do you know what's really hard?" She said, "What's really hard is seeing my brother sitting outside the classroom every day." I'm looking at her ... "What are you talking about?" Then we find out he was sitting outside the classroom. And, Oh my God! I said. What's going on here? They said, Oh... He's got... What is it? He's a disciplinary problem. Disciplinary problem? I said, I'd be a disciplinary problem too if I didn't know how to do the work.

Regarding communication and the parent-teacher relationship, the Task Force (2000) report is clear on what teachers say is important. In one question to teachers, teachers were asked to tell about their best Mi'kmaq students; what makes them so good? The teachers responded as follows: "They have strong work habits and very vocal parents ... The strongest ones see their parents around the school ... The few parents I have taught, I now have their kids. The trusting relationship I have [with them] is positive." (p. 13)

The main idea that teachers expressed is that more home support translates itself into active involvement of parents in the school life of Mi'kmaq children, which has a positive impact on school performance (Task Force, 2000). In parent-teacher interviews, open communication is valuable and necessary. However, the message imparted by Mi'kmaq mothers with whom I had a parent-teacher relationship speaks to a very different reality. Before their experiences with me, they indicated there was very little appetite on the part of teachers for accepting parental contribution or parent knowledge of

the child. They indicated that there appeared to be little interest by teachers or administrators in establishing working relationships with them as parents. They also noted that there appeared to be no interest in home visits to the community, having a parent–teacher night on the Reserve, or having a community liaison staff person at the school as tangible ways to build relationships.

Coming to a Deeper Political Understanding of My Practice

My philosophy and practice showed that I had evolved a method for encouraging parental participation and involvement in the school life of Mi'kmaq children. How did this come to be in the first place? Why did I continue to emphasize this belief in open communication with parents year after year and with each new assignment? I believe I was coming to a deeper understanding of my own practice.

I think from my very first home visits in Fort Liard I came away with two insights. The first was that knowing the family and establishing partnership with the parents had a significantly positive impact on the student and on my daily school practice. For the families in Nova Scotia, the visit represented something different, a novelty to have the teacher come to their house. Whether it was in the Northwest Territories or in Nova Scotia, the reactions were often very similar. Those reactions include curiosity and appreciation on the part of parents, and excitement and pride on the part of students. The carry over to the classroom made my life as teacher easier, as I knew I could always contact the parents and receive their support when and if I needed it. The children also came to understand that any serious behaviour issues would be addressed with the parents.

The second insight was that parent knowledge of the child's learning experiences, learning style, academic strengths, and general interests helped me as teacher design a program or make adjustments in program so that the child would experience success in school. Over time, this system worked so well and I enjoyed and benefited from the relationships so much that it became second nature. Home visits and communication with parents became part of my pedagogy, part of my educational practice. I found the practice indispensable; teachers and administrators came to accept it, and parents looked forward to and expected my visits at the beginning of every school year.

After Fort Liard, I began to reflect on the practice, the work, and the impact of what I was doing. I believe I began to bring a consciousness to my actions as an educator. Giving parents from Mi'kmaw families a participatory role, an active voice, and relevant input in the education of their children was an act of political consciousness. I was refusing to simply accept the colonizing script that continues to want to assimilate Aboriginal children into the mainstream. I was choosing—consistent with Cummins (2001) view—to adopt collaborative relationships of power with my students and their families rather than engage in coercive relationships of power, which is customary of the larger society and most schools. I was recognizing in a deeper way that I use my power as teacher to readdress the power imbalances that are so much a part of schooling for Aboriginal students. I discussed the practice with knowledgeable peers and mentors. I came to understand the effectiveness of what I was doing and the benefits it had for all stakeholders, parents, teacher, and students. My experiences with parents in general, and these three mothers specifically, reinforced the appropriateness of my methods.

Over time I came to understand how relationship building and enhanced communication improved my practice. At first I regarded it more as an act of self-interest on my part. As a teacher new to the profession and working in a different cultural context, having partnership with parents allowed me to manage my classroom better and survive my first year teaching. However, as I evolved as an educator and as I entered graduate studies, I came to see my actions to include Mi'kmaw parents in my work as a political act of rebalancing. Battiste (1991), Corson (1995, 2000) and Cummins (2001) all speak of how coercive relationships of power have been and are the norm for most Aboriginal parents in their relationship with schools. They note that the macro attitudes of colonization and assimilation of the dominant society towards Aboriginal people are simply mirrored in the micro relationships of school, unless educators become conscious of the need to interrupt. My efforts represented an interruption of those relationships in my work. I attempted to use *power with* rather than *power over* my students and parents.

Chapter Four

Blaming and Shaming

One of the most powerful themes to develop out of my conversations with Stacey, Tammy, and Jane was the blaming and shaming which is inflicted upon their children and other children from their First Nations community. As can be seen from the stories below, the school very rarely considered these children's and parents' points of view. In fact, in dealing with issues of underachievement and minority students, schools in general rarely reflect on their own policies and practices, which are often the cause of persistent student underachievement (Neito, 1996). Rather, they choose to place the burden of failure on the children themselves, their families, or their communities. Seldom is the complexity of cross-cultural relationships and socio-historical and socio-political context taken into account when attempting to interact with Aboriginal children. The stories that follow will illustrate that this pattern was also evident in their interactions with the school system.

Placing the Blame on Parents

These stories show the smoothness with which teachers and administrators blamed the students of the three Mi'kmaw mothers for their perceived behavioural issues is devastating for those Aboriginal families. The anger, sadness, and frustration these Mi'kmaw parents feel about their children's experiences with teachers and administrators was laid bare. Stacey describes to me the burden that was placed upon her.

Last week, my son was suspended for three days because of foul language. So I get a phone call and of course my son got suspended and I told them, it seems like some thing so small escalates into something so big. But I said it doesn't matter anyway, the child is always wrong. It is never the teacher's fault... I don't know why... I don't know what the gym teacher is like; I never had a meeting with the gym teacher, so anyway he got suspended. So I told the vice principal, "Thank you very much." You know, MY son got suspended. Out of school for three days while this teacher probably gets, you know, no fault at all... I'm so tired of it so, I said to the Vice Principal, "when he goes back, I don't even want him in the gym anymore". That's how I am starting to feel.

I wonder if there is anything that can make parents more troubled and angry than a situation in which their child is suffering, or where they feel their child is being disadvantaged or being discriminated against. The sense of powerlessness that is expressed by Stacey in this situation is striking and very sad. Her bewilderment at the attitude of the teacher, the coldness on the part of educators, is frustrating for her. It erodes her self-confidence as a parent who is supposed to be able to care for and protect her child.

Stacey commented that the child is always wrong. Her point of view is sincere. Stacey, as with most Aboriginal parents who have the fortitude to question decisions *the school* makes about their children, realizes that making the case for her son—so that the school might consider his side of the story—is a losing battle. From her experiences with her children, the school never admits that perhaps a mistake could have been made. The

school will not consider the idea that actions on the part of the teacher or other staff and students may have played a mitigating role in her son's behaviour.

Scholars have noted that Aboriginal parents and (especially) children are rarely given an opportunity to question or shape decisions or program that directly effect them (Battiste, 1999; Cummins, 2001; Neito, 1996; Nicholas, 2001). Stacey's child was suspended without a preliminary call home to discussion the matter with her. Stacey laments that she has never even met with the physical education teacher. In her frustration, in the heat of the moment, she concluded that she did not want her child to return to the gym to be under the gym teacher's "care".

Stacey was deeply frustrated because her child was suspended for using foul language. There were many unexplained variables and interactions between child, teacher, and administrator which led her child to be suspended for foul language. Stacey lamented that the teacher is never at fault and bears no responsibility in the child's behaviour. The context in which the situation occurred was not explored. The complexity of the tensions, the challenges of discipline and relationships across cultural and economic difference were not worthy of discussion. In response to this suspension, Stacey's story suggests that the socio-political positioning of Mi'kmaw communities alongside non-Mi'kmaw students is not explored or articulated. In fact there appears to be no place for dialogue at all. An important point to note is that, in this situation, she had no contact with the physical education teacher. Nor did her son have a chance to talk about the situation from his perspective. The act, which resulted in the suspension of her child from school, occurred in the gym, yet she did not have any communication or explanation from the teacher. All is filtered through the administrator. As a parent she is

clearly positioned outside the decision making process which has been noted in the Aboriginal schooling literature (Ryan, 1999, 2003).

Stacey had other frustrating experiences with the school system besides this situation. Stacey.

I told my son to say sorry, and he said “sorry”. And do you think that teacher would say sorry back? No she would not. So I looked at the Vice Principal, I got up out of the office and I told him, “you won’t have any trouble with my son no more. He won’t be coming back [there was only about a week left in June]...He won’t be coming back so you won’t have to worry about his behaviour any more”; And I walked out. I was just that livid. I told the teacher that my son deserved a sorry too. She would not say sorry, so I just walked out. The teachers need to bring their level down to the child and remember that they [children] have feelings just as much as we do.

Myths About Aboriginal Parents

Stacey does not sound like a parent who is disinterested in her child’s school experiences. Pushor and Murphy (2004a) suggest that there are a number of myths surrounding parent participation in the schooling of their children. These women’s stories dispel three myths. The first myth is that Aboriginal parents are not interested in their child’s education. The second is that white middle class parents are better parents. The third myth is that Aboriginal homes are hostile places.

Myth No.1: Aboriginal Parents are not Interested

All three women in this research as well as most of the Aboriginal parents I have worked with over the years have been profoundly interested in the educational experiences of their children. Jane, Stacey, and Tammy were quickly receptive to my questions about their children during those first visits. As the familiarity and trust between these women and myself evolved, they would often have questions and offer suggestions that could help me in the classroom. This trust and communication did not come immediately. As has been seen, all three women experienced conflict with some teachers and administrators. In spite of their previous experience with non-Aboriginal teachers, they extended to me an almost immediate openness to form a partnership. It took very little time for them to realize that my intentions were genuine and that I really did value their input. More importantly, the closer we worked together the more engaged their children were in my classroom.

It is worth asking if it was because of this misconception about Aboriginal parents and their seeming disinterest in their children's education, that Stacey was not notified until her child was on the verge of suspension. Was this why her son was suspended without any information from, or contact with, the physical education teacher.

Myth No.2: White Middle Class Parents are Better Parents

From my personal and professional experience working with parents from many ethnic backgrounds, I can say confidently that Aboriginal families value school success very highly. They place great importance on achievement, and have a genuine desire to see that their children are successful in school. Their experience, living in a society where

systemic racism still abounds, has made them keenly aware of the need for their children to acquire the cultural capital that schools offer.

I submit that the issue is not whether middle class white families care more about their children in school than Aboriginal parents. Those women's stories illustrate that the issue is that the school system has a different way of interpreting and dealing with Aboriginal students and their families. Indeed, in my experience, the difference can be seen between schools that have a significant Aboriginal population and schools that are predominantly white in their population. For example, I know most assuredly that at the school where my children attend every day, teachers would automatically contact my wife or me if my child experienced a serious lapse in behaviour or had become a persistent behaviour problem. However, the stories of Tammy, Jane, and Stacey illustrate that as parents of Mi'kmaw youth, they were often not informed about behaviour problems their children were experiencing.

At the school my children attend, teachers would not even consider an in-school suspension without discussing the situation and recommended course of action with my wife or me. This is not the experience of the Mi'kmaw parents who shared their stories with me. Even though these Mi'kmaw children share the same courses as non-Mi'kmaw children, receive the same report cards, are subject to the same rules and code of conduct; their parents are often not consulted regarding decisions that directly affect their schooling. The stories of these women that these unstated, unacknowledged practices are disparaging to Mi'kmaw youth, as well as frustrating, stressful, and painful for Mi'kmaw parents—who are generally concerned about their children's school experiences and learning. Stacey spoke to this:

I have been in meetings with quite a few teachers and like I said some of them, they stand by their guns, and they are not going— and you're not going to make them— change their mind. I find that there are no compromises; like they say, the teacher is in control. Whatever comes from the teacher, you have your principal and vice principal backing the teacher up... ..even if the teacher is wrong.

Myth No 3: Mi'kmaw Homes Are Potentially Hostile Places

Another myth about Mi'kmaw families, which was more obvious to me as a teacher, was that of being wary of Mi'kmaw homes. There is little place for relationship building and history has shaped Mi'kmaw and non-Mi'kmaw communities in profoundly different ways, it is thus quite possible for non-Mi'kmaw educators to have had little meaningful communication with Mi'kmaw people. The absence of real relationships with Mi'kmaw people can foster suspicion and distrust. Spinelli (1990) describes this phenomenon in his wonderful young adolescent novel in which Black and White people live in separate ends of the town and rarely, if ever, have real face-to-face contact. Maniac, the central character and one of the few to ever cross between the two divided communities, sees how the lack of personal contact, fuelled by a largely racist media creates distrust. He notes, “But the East Enders stayed in the east and the West Enders stayed in the west, and the less they know about each other, the more they invented” (1990, p. 159). Does this same living apart mean that non-Mi'kmaw educators have invented stories of Mi'kmaw families that become staffroom chat? Myths of violence, abuse, drunkenness, and hostility in Mi'kmaw communities are seldom articulated but they are alluded to in conversations. In my own work I sensed that my home visits to the

Reserve were regarded sometimes with awe, as people felt it was an act of courage that I would cross over into the Mi'kmaw community. My own experiences, as well as those of other non-Aboriginal educators who have taken the time to develop relationships with Aboriginal families, attest to the rich diversity of families that one finds in Aboriginal communities. Nonetheless, the myth of Mi'kmaw homes as fearful places may serve to keep many non-Mi'kmaw educators away

The Effects on Parents and Families of Being Placed on the Margins

Cummins (2001) writes that schools unquestionable acceptance of an assimilationist approach to minority communities, creates hostile and exclusionary relationships with the community. This means that the prior knowledge and experience that Mi'kmaw children bring from home would have no place in the school. It follows naturally that, since Eurocentric schools believe only in promoting Eurocentric attitudes, values, and behaviours, teachers would not view the knowledge or beliefs which Aboriginal parents possess as rich resources to seek out. Rather, they would hold at best an apathetic stance and at worst a disdainful one towards Aboriginal communities and parents.

The Parents' Perception of Hostility from Educators

Stacey sees the school as hostile/adversarial towards Mi'kmaq children and parents in general and hostile/adversarial to her and her children in particular. Perhaps a more accurate description of the manner in which schools deal with the Mi'kmaw family in general and Stacey specifically is that bureaucratic efficiency (i.e., little time spent on

dialogue to resolve differences in values or needs) is privileged over what is best for the child, family, or the community (Corson, 2000). In this model of bureaucratic efficiency everything works fine so long as parents do not question the actions of the school. The moment a child, in this case Stacey's son, or the parent, Stacey, questions the authority of the teacher or the school, systems and procedures fall in place that serve to silence the family. Stacey notes that the administrator backed the teacher, and there was little room for a meaningful dialogue between Stacey and the school. In this case there was no opportunity for Stacey to discuss the situation with the teacher. The negative effect on the child and the family was immediate and powerful.

The effect of this bureaucratic efficiency system on the school is twofold. First, the school is rid of the agitator and operations quickly and efficiently go back to order. Second, parents and students, who are familiar with the incident, learn about the power of the school which acts as a deterrent to others, thereby increasing the efficiency of the school to manage potential "problem" students and parents. The best interest of the child and the community are sacrificed to the loyalty to the system and the status quo. Aboriginal students thereby continue to suffer unacceptably high rates of underachievement and school failure (RCAP, 1996).

In another situation Darlene was acting out in an effort to get kicked out of class, which Stacey found very sad and frustrating:

And the teacher started going on about the negative things that were wrong with her (Darlene). I mean why? So I took [Darlene] home and I asked her, why are you doing this and stuff like that? She knew that she could get kicked out of class, no problem. And I was so mad because... we had to come back the next day and

have another meeting with the principal. I told him, "You know what? My daughter is doing this because she knows she can get kicked out of a teacher's class. Just because she feels that the teacher has no time for her." And this is what my daughter deserves, in the class? You know, and that is what upset me.

What kind of experience was Darlene having in school? Stacey knows her daughter better than anyone else, although this knowing seemed to be continually ignored by teachers. She knew Darlene was acting inappropriately to get expelled from a class that was essentially unwelcoming to her. Solomon (2000) describes how African Canadian youth in urban settings are "pushed out" rather than "drop out" of school because the school does not validate who they are. The notion of drop out suggests that students are making a conscious choice to leave the system, whereas push out places the agency within the system. Push out explains early school leaving as part of a system which uses its policies, practices, assumptions, and beliefs to make life so unbearable there is no choice for the student but to leave. If this situation continues in this way for Darlene, she will likely become pushed out but be labeled a drop out.

Tammy talked about her own experiences in school and how Aboriginal children and African Nova Scotian children felt marginalized and discriminated against. She had clear memories when asked if racism was a factor when she was in school as a student:

Like the way they are in school today, like hanging in their own groups, not mingling with other students. That's how we were too. We even tended to start being friends with the local African community, and we just hung around amongst ourselves because we were either getting name called or picked on. We would end

up getting suspended or expelled because we started the fight. But they [white student] initiated it. It is even like that today some times.

Tammy's story illustrates that the dominant population of white students and the inability or unwillingness of the school to interrupt unfair practices or low expectations kept minority students like her in their place. Tammy believes this is still is the reality for Mi'kmaw and African Nova Scotian students in her daughter's group.

Perception of Power Over Rather than Power With

Cummins (2001) speaks of how the macro relations of *power over* in the dominant society are reproduced in the micro relations of the classroom. Students who are in the minority band together for protection and support against an ingrained and efficient bureaucracy that keeps them in their place; that gives them no voice; and which is closed to their parents, their communities, and their culture. Tammy talks about her daughter's desire to have her culture respected in her school.

My daughter has expressed that she wants to see our language and culture taught in school. Sometimes she does not want to go to school because she has this problem with this one teacher now and it's like pretty bad. I feel they [administration, other teachers] always stick up for their staff as right.

Like Stacey, Tammy feels powerless against a staff and administration that is never wrong and always unyielding and uncompromising. Her daughter Kathy had trouble with certain teachers, yet Tammy was at a loss to find a way to defend her child against an intransigent and unyielding school system. When I asked her if she, like other

parents, saw the intransigence of teachers and administrators in making space for a different perspective, Tammy shared her own opinion based on her experiences:

I find that in my conversations with other parents, they tell me that the teacher is never wrong, that always the child is blamed. Whatever happens in school, the teacher or administrator will never admit that maybe a mistake has been made. Often staff are not interested in the child's side of the story... The kids could say it until they are blue in the face and the teacher would still play a deaf ear. I know it happened in a couple of cases, not just with my daughter, but with other students as well.

Tammy talked about an extreme situation involving one of her daughter's friends:

Okay, there is this one student that has a problem with one of the teachers there. And it seems like this teacher just picks on this student. It doesn't have to be anything. He [the student] could be just walking down the hallway, right? And he picks on him. One time this year, this student got into a confrontation with the teacher. The confrontation occurred because the teacher was putting down and getting mad at his sister. So he ended up going after this teacher and he got suspended.

Unexamined Assumptions about Aboriginal Students

These stories show that in this atmosphere, sour and toxic relationships can develop between teachers and students. It is not the teachers or the school who suffers the consequences when this occurs, but in the end it is the student who is suspended and it is the parent who is powerless to advocate for her child. Bureaucratic efficiency keeps the

machine operating at peak performance, while Mi'kmaw students become more disempowered, alienated, and frustrated. This metaphor of an efficiently operating machine even while students are being chewed up by it was visible within the stories of these three women.

The Assumption that Students Drop Out When They are Pushed Out

Tammy lamented the fact that she knows of many students who would like to be in school, students who understand how important it is to be in school. Those children could not endure school any longer. School became such an unbearable place for these kids that they left. Even though they know school is where they need to be, they cannot bring themselves to stay in a place that erodes and assaults their identity on a daily basis. School boards, teachers, and administrators—the very people who should be acting as their advocates—are not helping them be successful.

Solomon (2000) in studying the experiences of African Canadian urban youth, found they tended to become alienated from the institutions that were intended to give them access to an education. Minority students who desperately need access to the cultural capital that schooling provides are denied this when they are pushed out of the system. Tammy concurred: *There are a lot of students that are not in school now that probably wish they were in school. They are not there because they're expelled or because of behaviour problems. And some [of the suspensions] are legit and some are not.*

Jane spoke about the big picture—about her family about her Mi'kmaw sons—and explained how they were treated differently and marginalized because they were

Aboriginal. Jane knew that Mi'kmaq children and families were viewed in a manner that suggested that expectations and standards for Aboriginal youth were lower than for non-Aboriginal children or children whose families had status in the community. In our conversations, I asked Jane about her concerns regarding her children and their experiences with school. She replied:

I was worried that between the school and me, they had different expectations. And I knew that we were always on a different platform. You know, the school would have this expectation, and my child would be down there already upon entering into school. We were already down there; first we were Aboriginal, number two we were segregated. We were into this little community called a Reservation. So we were really cut off from the community around us.

The Assumption of Aboriginal Students' Defiance when they are Simply not Seen

Jane later told a story which highlights the fact that some teachers did not really listen to the Mi'kmaq child in front of them. Rather, their interactions are colored by their unexamined and often prejudicial assumptions about Mi'kmaq children and how they feel they act. Jane explained:

My son was in Grade 2. The choice he had was to put his rubber boots on and go... he could go outside, or he could stay in. And he really wanted to go outside... and he couldn't put these boots on, and he couldn't put the boots on... and the teacher kept saying, you put the boots on and go outside, or you go in the classroom. And he's standing there crying. He's trying to put these boots on. So he wasn't allowed to wear his [in door] shoes outside because, you know, he

could get them wet, and things like that... [He had to stay in the classroom] I remember thinking [about the teacher] "You do not know my child." So I find out all these things, and then they went and they called us all in. She [the teacher] said, "Well Gary is reading at a 4.5 level." Here he is in Grade 2, right? And the teacher is looking and saying, "His work doesn't show it." And she's going on and on. And then they wanted him to wear this little beeper. Every time that he did something wrong, this thing would beep and they would put him back into his place. And so I said, "Is everybody finished? I'm taking all your advice." So I brought up this bag, and I put the boots on the table. And I said, "See these boots?" I said. "Did it ever occur to you to go say, Gary, why could you not put these boots on? You came here with them on this morning." I said, "Did you ask him?" She goes, "No." I said, "I did, when he came home." I asked him "Why did you not put the boots on? What was the big deal with the boots?" He goes, "Mom, they're too small. They're not mine." I said, "Oh, okay." I looked at them and said, "No they're not yours but they're brand new like yours." That's how unobservant teachers are of certain students. I don't know whether it's just Aboriginals, or just Blacks, or poor, or kids they don't know, or if they're just overwhelmed by 23 kids in the classroom. I don't know. If that wasn't my child, and if I was the teacher, I know I would have asked him, "What's wrong with the boots?" That would have been my first question, "What's wrong with the boots?" He came in with them this morning. Kids get mixed up. It's as simple as that.

Did the teacher make assumptions about Gary, about his defiance, assuming that his refusal to put the boots on was about being disobedient and disruptive? Even in grade 2, the school storied Gary.

The Assumption of Equity When Some Students' Problems Are Not Recognized

Jane also talked about the learning difficulties that her son was experiencing and how it did not seem possible for the school to recognize these problems or to help him. Even after explaining that her son had just been diagnosed with a learning disability in a school he had previously attended, he could not get the services he needed to be successful. The school board would not recognize the findings of the other jurisdiction. Jane had a pretty clear understanding of why the school would not recognize the tests from the school district her son previously attended.

Because it would have cost them money, it would have cost them money, and I don't think they thought it was worth spending money on an Aboriginal, I guess that was their perception. That's what I could see as I did my investigation into it. I found out that they did have a teacher, who had a child that was dyslexic, but that child was taken care of and they were provided with the extra services.

Jane cited the case of another student who was non-Mi'kmaw and the child of a teacher. That child was able to receive services. These services should have been made available to Jane's son, but they were not. This episode reinforces Jane's perception that Aboriginal children and families are treated differently; that there are different expectations and levels of service and privilege for Aboriginal families. *I knew we were*

always on a different platform ... the school would have this expectation, and my child would be down there already upon entering into school.

She further explained her frustration in trying to access services:

I took him to get tested. According to their testing he was a prime candidate for extra school services. And we could not get them [Indian and Northern Affairs] to pay. Couldn't get anyone to pay. We were willing to come up with half, and that was an amount of money, and my understanding was that it would take three years to get him through. I was willing to work extra hard and to try and see how I could make extra money with my crafts or something. Just to do that. But we couldn't get any acknowledgement from the School Board.

I asked Jane, about who gets blamed when the child has difficulty? *It's the parents and the child. And the child has to suffer because you are there getting angry with him because, "Oh you only made a 3. You should have made a 1. What are you making a 3 for". As parents we have learned to be so negative to our children because the school feeds us negativity.*

The Effect of Blaming on Parents

Blaming infers the child's failure to achieve is seen as being located within the child or his family or his culture. A broader socio-political analysis takes the focus off the individual and locates the problem within the institution and the system. It should cause educators to examine their own classroom and school-wide practices. Without this critical analysis many minority parents are left to internalize the racism of the system and, in so doing, they may revert to laying blame on their children as the school teaches

them to do (Tompkins 1998). Similarly, Jane said: *as parents we have learned to be so negative to our children because the school feeds us negatively.*

As I hear the voices of these women, I think about the suffering they and their children have endured. I look for some explanation for the way these women and their children are positioned on the landscape of school (e.g. Pushor 2001).

In the characterization of teachers and parents in this plot line, teachers are often cast as protagonists, the principal performers who advocate for conditions that support and encourage the learning and development of their students. Parents are often cast as antagonists, being seen as doing or not doing things that interfere with the quest of the protagonist to enhance learning. Parents most certain to be cast as antagonists are those who do not meet the white middle-class values and expectations of the school system. (Pushor & Murphy, 2004a p. 2)

The blaming and shaming directed by the school towards these 3 Mi'kmaw parents and their children may serve as a way to justify their persistent underachievement in school. It deflects attention away from having the school and the teachers examine their own attitudes, practices, and policies that maybe contributing to poor student achievement. If nothing else, it privileges Eurocentric values, attitudes, knowledge, and behaviour over Aboriginal ways of learning, being, and doing.

In Chapter 5, I explore other strategies which these parents noted the school has developed when blaming and shaming are not effective. These strategies helped this school locate the underachievement of these Mi'kmaw students within the children, their families, or Mi'kmaw culture itself.

Chapter 5

How Schools Attempt to Legitimize Their Performance

The Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (1996) states that 57 percent of Aboriginal students drop out of school before graduation, as compared to 15 percent for non-Aboriginal students. A significant number remain functionally illiterate. It is reported that a disproportionate number of Aboriginal youth are labeled as “special needs” and are placed in resource rooms or special classes, streamed into less-academic programs, and prescribed drugs for behaviour disorders. We need to ask if, in these instances, educators are making assumptions about Aboriginal students without involving parents as true participants in the decision making process (Pushor & Murphy 2004a). Schools have situations where certain children are under special management by the school system. In some cases, control of the behaviour of these children is the primary goal for the school.

Surprising Revelations

As parents told me their stories about their experiences, as well as their children’s experiences with school, some surprising points emerged. Most revealing is the idea that their children were often *pushed through school*, which manifested itself in a variety of ways. Parents would assume that school progress was satisfactory, unaware until report card time that there were serious problems with achievement. Parents also recognized that, so long as the child behaved himself or herself in the classroom, there would be very few exchanges with the school. These women were often shocked at the low expectations for their children on the part of teachers, especially at the low level of skill mastery

displayed by the students, and the lack of academic progress of their children at the high school level. What once was the prime objective, graduation from high school, became an empty achievement because the children were functioning at such a low level. As one of the mothers points out, “*But I said to myself, you know, I am going to be so proud that my children graduate. But then I say to myself, why should they graduate if they are not learning what they are supposed to be learning.*”

Surprising Revelations About Othering

Delpit (1995) writes about the phenomenon of *othering*. She maintains that white middle class teachers have high expectations for children who they perceive as like themselves or their children. When teachers work with children who are culturally different from themselves, they may unconsciously fall into the trap of othering these students. Delpit maintains that teachers do not care in the same way for children who they perceive as other people’s children.

Gay (2004), a leading African American scholar working in the area of culturally responsive teaching, also speaks to the issue of educators teaching in cross-cultural situations. She calls upon teachers to *care* for all students, particularly those students who come from culture and heritage which differ from that of the teacher. Too often such teachers state that they *care* about their students, yet they are willing to live with unacceptable high failure and under achievement. Gay urges that educators have to care in a loving but critical way. She argues that educators must be willing to challenge the school’s policies, practices, and attitudes that prevent minority students from attaining high achievement in schools. Her research speaks for the need for teachers from

dominant groups to engage in anti-racist, anti-bias education and training to ensure that their expectations are high for all students. Orr, Paul & Paul (2002) in their life history research with Mi'kmaw educators describe this same phenomena when they speak of their caring of their students as "relentless." In the following sections I describe five strategies that these 3 Mi'kmaw women told me that reflect how those teachers pursue unacceptable levels of caring and education for children.

Absence of Mi'kmaw Perspective in the Curriculum

One of the significant points to come out of the stories and conversations with these mothers was their disappointment and frustration with the limited inclusion of Mi'kmaq language and culture in the curriculum offered by the school. They wondered if more exposure to Mi'kmaw content in the academic program, and more opportunities to share their pride in their history and culture would have resulted in students remaining more interested in school. What were the children of Mi'kmaw families learning? Stacey laments the fact that the overwhelming Eurocentric focus of the curriculum leaves little or no curriculum content that reflected First Nations culture.

That's another thing, why should we have to learn French? You know. I mean I am not discriminating against any culture. But, I mean you know, French are learning French... Now we should be able to learn our own language.... We don't have too many people in our culture that know the language. So like for me, if my mother knew the language, she is an elder, and she should be able to go to the school and have a 40-minute or 20 minute [lesson] in that school and teach it. That is what they did in Shubenacadie with Nancy [A woman who knew the

language, was willing to teach the language and culture to the children in a school setting, but who was not a certified teacher]... *a gentleman came with her, he was a non-Native, an older fellow, he learned the language in order to teach it because he's certified [as a teacher].*

Stacey knows that her child is frustrated with school. She knows that her child does not see herself, her family, or her community reflected in school curriculum. Being required to take French, but having no option to study Mi'kmaq language or culture, is unfair from, Stacey's perspective. She does not begrudge the offering of French to non-Mi'kmaq students. She laments the unavailability of the opportunity for her child to study and celebrate and critically explore Mi'kmaq language and culture. Nicholas (2001) notes the continuing assimilationist tendencies of provincial schooling. She maintains that provincial schools have had as much of an assimilating influence as the overtly hostile residential schools they replaced. She argues that one of the single most important actions that can be taken in the direction of self-determination for Aboriginal people is the reclamation and revival of Aboriginal languages.

Pushing Children Through the Grades

Stacey recognized that there is something amiss about the education her children are receiving, particularly Darlene. *I'm getting so tired of it. If you got too many students in your class, why don't you cut your classes down, and why don't you hire some more teachers? You know what I mean, because its getting to the point where you're just getting fed up to a level where they're [the children] getting pushed through the system. You know she is in grade 8 now and has a low level of reading.*

What does “pushed through” mean for this parent and this child? Stacey was worried about the implications for Darlene with respect to life after school, if she was pushed through the system without acquiring the necessary skills from school. Darlene was not reading at the level she was supposed to be reading; she had not achieved educational outcomes for her age and grade. Every year she was falling further behind. Also distressing for Stacey was the fact that no one at the school was listening to her concerns or taking any action to ensure Darlene was functioning at grade level.

There are three significant implications of being pushed through school. First, Stacey is worried that Darlene is unable to do the work and learn at grade level. Second, she is afraid that Darlene is falling further behind her peers as time passes. Third, Stacey sees that Darlene is feeling worse about herself because she cannot work with the other children or function at grade level. As her frustration with the demands of school heighten, her work suffers and her behaviour becomes more disruptive. Since self-esteem is directly related to competence, her self-esteem is eroding, causing her confidence to try new learnings to diminish, and so a cycle of frustration and hopelessness begins. Stacey worries about her daughter. Darlene is settling into a grade 8 class yet she is nowhere near being able to do the work. Stacey has known that Darlene has had much difficulty through the lower grades and is frustrated that her daughter’s learning needs have not been addressed and that her child is being pushed through the grades:

I asked them one year to fail her, because I found she was too far behind in her language and understanding of what she was reading ...they found she was too big for her age. But to me that didn't matter whether she was a big girl or not because ...You worry about their education. You worry if they are learning what

they are supposed to be learning. If they're not, you [the school] should be teaching them. They [Darlene and others] should be to a point where they feel good about themselves.

Stacey sees this as an either/or situation. Darlene either progresses, as she needs to, so that she is ready for the next grade or she needs to be held back. Stacey is suggesting that some kids, particularly her daughter and Mi'kmaw children specifically, are being pushed through the grades. Darlene is attending but she is learning very little and no one seems to be bothered by that circumstance. So long as Darlene is behaving, the school has no problems with her. Everyone except Stacey is satisfied. "Students can become labeled by peers, lose their confidence, receive poorer quality instruction, fall into a system of being tracked and can fall behind in their work. Most importantly, however, in this segregated system, teachers can and do lose ownership of these students, the very ones who most need them as advocates." (Task Force, 2000, p. 52)

Stacey expressed her disappointment and frustration, knowing the implications "pushing through" will have on their future lives:

But like I said, I just cross my fingers and say to myself, you know, my kids graduated. I mean I never graduated in my life that is the one thing that disappoints me. But I said to myself, you know, I am going to be so proud that my children do. But then you say to yourself, why should they graduate if they are not learning what they are supposed to be learning? You know, like I said, and education has changed so much. I wish it were like in the old days when we had it. We had math through the whole year... Now that they come out with that

foundations math, who is going to be able to succeed in life with low math like that?

Continued Low Expectations for Mi'kmaw Students

Darlene may graduate if she is not pushed out of school before grade 12, but what will the graduation certificate mean? She will have been pushed through the system and finish with a diploma that will not allow her the opportunity to go to community college, university, or land a decent well-paying job. Her diploma will neither give her access to cultural capital in the mainstream society, nor will it give, as an education should, more self-actualization as a Mi'kmaq person. Rather than being a successful bicultural person who has a foot in both worlds, she will be left awash with a presence in neither. Stacey spoke of the insincere manner in which some teachers communicate with Mi'kmaw parents:

You know what I find this year, it's like, and [the teacher] says, oh she is doing all right. But you get the report card. Well obviously, you see the [poor] marks on the report card, and they're like, okay, Language Arts, not understanding the concepts of what she is reading. Now that is a hypocritical remark.

What are the expectations for Darlene? Stacey described getting a report card with anecdotal comments that are contradictory to the subject grades. The teacher noted that Darlene is “doing alright” but in another part of the card the educator indicated that reading comprehension is poor. In the eyes of the teacher, it is “all right” that Darlene has poor reading comprehension. Is that the best that can be expected from/for Darlene? Further to this, a major concern for Stacey is Darlene’s life path after grade 12. What will

Darlene's competencies be? What skills will she have mastered? Will she be able to take her place in the work force, in college, in vocational school or some other higher calling? If she graduates but is unable to pursue further goals, will this not be a blow to her confidence and hurt her self-esteem? Will it sentence her to a life of poverty because she is unable to pursue post-secondary study or training?

Stacey's own lived experiences with systemic racism, in the greater society, taught her that Mi'kmaq children often have to overcome attitudinal barriers in the workplace. Darlene's poor achievement leaves her lacking in both competence and confidence. As a result Stacey believes, and rightly so, that Darlene may have great difficulty succeeding off Reserve.

Darlene is doing poorly as indicated by the grades in the subject areas, yet the anecdotal portion of the report and the comments to the parent by the teacher suggest that Darlene is doing all right. How can that be so? Stacey sees the contradiction and worries that the teacher is satisfied with Darlene's poor results and that the teacher expects nothing more. Darlene is doing poorly but that is OK. Here, there seems to be a disconnect between parent and school/teacher. The teacher knows best; the teacher will take care of school matters and parents *must trust* the education system to take care of children.

Delpit (1995) and Gay (2004) speak of teachers from dominant groups distancing themselves from minority students and see them as other people's children. Both scholars maintain that teachers don't work as hard to ensure the success of children who they do not recognize as being like their own; each critiques teachers from dominant groups who maintain that they *care* about the minority children they teach and yet are willing to live

with unacceptably high rates of failure from such children. The stories told by these three Mi'kmaw women suggest that low teacher expectations play a negative role in the achievement of their children.

Bureaucratic Efficiency Above All Else

Schools do not seem to be designed to consider the parents' point of view. Bureaucratic efficiency, the smooth running of the system, appears to be what is important. As long as Darlene's behaviour is in check, the school has no problem with moving Darlene along. The fact that she is not achieving, and that her mother is concerned about it, is not an issue. The school appears to show it does not welcome the concerns, ideas, and suggestions from the families of Mi'kmaq children. The school appears to operate in isolation from the other partners, such as the parents and extended family that shape and guide the lives of Mi'kmaw youth. These findings are consistent with those reported by the Task Force (2000):

The concept of the collective, and extended family and the prime importance of relationship have deep roots within most Aboriginal communities. However, traditionally as children pass through the higher grades, there is less focus on relationship building, the classroom climate, and emotional/social issues. More time is devoted to dealing with academic content. (Task Force, 2000, p. 19)

Stacey's own words support her concern for an authentic learning experience. *I would have felt better where my daughter was learning something and I would be proud for her to graduate. Now I see my daughter struggling ... they don't have time for her in school.*

According to Stacey, Darlene is not receiving effective instruction to work with her strengths and deal with her needs. From Stacey's point of view the school has no time for her. Darlene is being managed efficiently; accommodations are made and implemented so the best interest of the school—not necessarily those of the student—are realized (Corson 2000). Darlene is on the treadmill, the conveyor belt of school, on a journey towards graduation. Corson (2000) would say that the path for her is clear. She will either keep her place and graduate, fall off the path and become another drop out statistic, or disrupt the flow of the machine. If she disrupts the flow of the machine, the school will take action to insure that Darlene either gets back on track to be pushed along the system or that she will drop out. In either case, the law of bureaucratic efficiency will be honoured and the machine will return to peak performance.

Unrealistic Expectations of Mi'kmaw Parents

Jane is an elder in the community. She knows the children in her community and especially the peers of her own kids. She noted that whereas the expectations of the school towards Mi'kmaw students are quiet low, the expectations of the school for parents can be rather high and unrealistic. According to Jane, parents are expected to fix the problem when children are not achieving in school.

You know, the school... they think that the place of the parents is to be there and to assist. But they don't really teach the parents HOW to do that. I mean, you have parents that are uneducated, you have a child that is having problems in school, and the parents trying to sit down with their child, and they're looking and they're saying... "I can't do this work. How am I going to help my child?"

And that's what the school expects from me. So I'm saying, somewhere along the line there's a crack there and the parents fall through the crack. So if it doesn't come through it's not only the child's fault, it's the parents' fault, according to you know... to the teachers.

Jane is a parent who makes herself heard. She is a woman, a mother, who has been dealing with the school system for a long time. Gary is her youngest child and so her experience with school and with teachers is many and varied. She knows that many Mi'kmaq children never make it to graduation which is consistent with findings in the RACP (1996) and the Task Force, (2000). They drop out or are pushed out (Solomon, 2002) before they finish grade 12. When children are not successful in school, it is assumed that parents need to be putting in the effort at home to make sure that homework is done or children are reprimanded for behaviour problems. Teachers can always fall back on the myth that Mi'kmaq parents do not care about education. They may also say that Mi'kmaq culture does not value education (Task force, 2000). In these lines of reasoning, the responsibility is always on the parents, not the school or the teacher. For example Jane stated:

Someone asked me today how many kids were graduating this year and I said, gee I don't know. I know Kevin is, but I know Kevin is going back to school; you know I think he wants to take an extra course or something. I don't know who else. I know a couple of other boys should have graduated this year, but they didn't.

The school does not intimidate Jane. She recognizes the fact that many other parents are uncomfortable dealing directly with school and teacher. Jane, unlike some of

her peers, does not feel that the teacher or the school is always right or has all the answers: *Or they call me in because I am very vocal. I think that's the difference between me and some other parents. I find that if you're vocal and stand up to teachers, you know... I don't go in there with a perception that the teachers know it all.* Using her voice, asking intelligent and appropriate questions, that is all in the realm of what parents should be doing. However, because of Jane's audacity to question an unfair system, she may risk being labeled as difficult or uppity by the school.

What Mi'kmaw Parents Do Know

Parents like Tammy understand that there is a problem when children do not understand the material they are supposed to master in a grade. she understands the fundamentals that children should learn. When her children do not master these fundamentals and are pushed through the grades, she gets very frustrated and angry. She knows what children need, or at least she knows when her children are not learning the basics.

There Is A Link Between Competence and Confidence

Mi'kmaw parents, like these three women see the important links between competence and confidence. As their children struggle with a lack of competence, it influences their sense of confidence, which again negatively influences their sense of competence and the spiraling down towards failure in school is the end result. Tammy sees clearly the connection between identity and performance. In my field notes during the interview period, she states, *Why is their child [Aboriginal parents] suspended?*

Because they don't have the Mi'kmaq language or the culture in the school system, if they included Mi'kmaq language [and cultural curriculum], I think it would cut down on a lot of suspensions. It's long overdue.

Like Stacey, Tammy knows instinctively, as all parents do, that children need to achieve basic competences to build upon before they are ready for the next level. She said, *Well, why don't they fail kids anymore? Yeah, and we know a lot of students should have failed before because... they weren't up to par but they were passed anyway for social reasons.*

Tammy did not understand that failing children, most times, is not an appropriate or effective strategy for dealing with students who are not successful in school. However, it is the only strategy she knows as a parent. The school system might help Tammy to be made aware of that. If schools were responsible for Kathy's failure, they might show other ways for helping her and children like her. A more inclusive school approach, based on working with the most vulnerable students would place a high priority upon addressing the needs of children like Tammy's daughter. The school could communicate such a philosophy to parents and offer them strategies for their children.

Cultural Inclusion Is Important

Tammy recognized that children were missing something very important because they had very few opportunities to learn about Mi'kmaq Language and culture. She recognized that Mi'kmaw children and families did not see themselves reflected in the school. Their language, culture, and history had a very small space on the school landscape. Tammy felt strongly that children should have the opportunity to experience

their language and culture in school. *My daughter would pick Mi'kmaq. And she would look forward to it going into school especially if they do hands-on stuff with the students. They'll want to... love to go to school.*

Tammy knew in her heart that the absence of Mi'kmaq language and cultural learning opportunities for First Nations students was a disadvantage for Mi'kmaw children. Tammy intuitively knew that Mi'kmaq programming in school would be a benefit to First Nations children! The Task Force (2000) report spoke to the issue.

The majority of parents indicated that they wanted more presence of Mi'kmaq language and culture in their children's program. Students spoke enthusiastically about times when they were able to bring parts of their culture into the classroom, into the school whether as part of research projects at the junior high level, or at the drumming presentations at the high school or when they learned words in Mi'kmaq and did presentations for the Heritage Fair in Mi'kmaq. Mi'kmaw students spoke about how proud it made them to be able to share who they were with non-Mi'kmaw students. (p. 46)

The findings of the Task Force (2000) and current research on Aboriginal schooling (Battiste, 1999; Haig-Brown, 1997; Kawagley, 1995; McCarty, 2002) clearly highlight the need to decentre the Eurocentrism of public schools. "Traditional schooling has attempted to devalue the language and culture of Mi'kmaw children and replace them with the language and culture of the dominant group. The prior knowledge and experiences of Mi'kmaw students were traditionally considered as being impediments to learning. However just the opposite is true." (Task Force, p. 46)

Communication With Parents by Dialogue is Needed

These stories show that communication with parents is critical to alleviating these parents' frustration and anxiety with regard to the blaming of their children, family, and community for the child's failure. These parents need to be aware of alternative strategies to failing kids and holding them back in the grade. When parents understand the options they are more likely to be able to advocate for those strategies to be used with their children. Parents can then help support these strategies at home and be part of the monitoring process. Tammy knows what her kids need. She cannot understand how her daughter can be pushed along the grades and not adequately master the curriculum. Yet this happens to her daughter every year. Tammy knows that this cannot be in the best interests of her child. *I think it's stupid. I know a lot of kids in the higher grades they wouldn't be having difficulty now, if they were held back a year and taught times tables or whatever they were going to need, you know what I mean? And behavioural issues are because of it too... because they get frustrated because they can't do the work.*

Impact of Eurocentric Schooling on non-Mi'kmaw Students

I want to close the chapter with one final point regarding the inclusion of Mi'kmaq language, culture, and history. From listening to these parents, and based on my experiences as a teacher in 3 different First Nations communities, I believe a more inclusive curriculum would have an impact on the school in general, and non-Mi'kmaw students in particular. With the absence of a comprehensive incorporation of Mi'kmaq language and culture into the school curriculum, students from the dominant group are also disadvantaged. The children from the dominant group end up with a monocultural

education which denies them an understanding of how the processes of history have shaped Mi'kmaw and non-Mi'kmaw in very different and important ways. Students in this school have little understanding of the current reality of Mi'kmaq culture because they have not been educated about it. In the absence of such education, non-Mi'kmaw students' understanding of Mi'kmaq culture maybe fuelled by ignorance and by erroneous, often racist, assumptions. If the relationship between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal peoples is to be rebalanced, as the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (1996) suggests, non-Aboriginal students also must have a deeper understanding of the Aboriginal colonization experience that has so shaped their ancestors relationships with Aboriginal peoples.

Chapter 6

Creating Counter Stories

In this chapter, I identify hope as a central factor. What happens when educators redefine their role and rather than acting as an agent of assimilation or as Giroux (1998) would say, “clerks of the empire”, become advocates for Mi’kmaq students?

There are many educators who define their role in a very different way in relation to culturally diverse students and communities. They aim explicitly to expand students’ options for identity formation by affirming and building on students’ prior experience and exploring with them how they can make powerful contributions within their societies. In other words, their pedagogy explicitly takes into account where students are coming from and where they are going. The teacher mediates between students’ past and their future. The instructional focus is on empowerment rather than disempowerment”. (Cummins, 2003, p.13)

Building from a Base of Strength

My approach when I arrived at this rural Nova Scotia school, of which 20% were from the nearby First Nations community, was very basic. As a teacher with 8 years experience working with Aboriginal youth, I learned that to be successful, all children needed to build competence from a base of strength. Therefore, I had to find out at what level Gary, Darlene, and Kathy were achieving academically before any programming could be done. I needed to know more about the children, including their school experiences, their strengths, and their challenges. Cumulative records and discussing the

children with former teachers were starting points. Working with the children early on to gauge their ability, work habits, and attitude was also important and I set to work at covering all of these bases right away.

I knew from previous experience that, to get the complete picture, I had to meet with the parents of my students early in the school year. They would complete the historic view of the children's schooling and would provide me with a family perspective of my students. I also recognized from my work in other schools that a partnership with parents—a real working relationship—would be a tremendous asset, particularly in helping students with serious behavioural and academic challenges. High expectations for my students, identifying their strengths and challenges, and establishing a working relationship with parents of students, particularly those with a history of academic and behavioural difficulties; were the objectives I set for myself as I went out on home visits at the beginning of that first year. I only learned later, as I engaged in wider reading in my graduate studies, that my intuitive hunches as to how to proceed in a cross-cultural environment were confirmed in the work of such researchers as, Cummins (2001), Gay (2000), Nicholas (2001), Nieto (1996), Orr, Paul & Paul (2002), Pushor (2001), and Tompkins (1998).

Over the course of that first school year, the parents of the children I taught came to expect that I would be in contact with them to let them know when their child was doing well or when their child was experiencing difficulty. They came to expect that I would ask them to be engaged in their children's schooling. Through home or work visits with them on the Reserve, I became a familiar face to parents. I was seen to be someone who worked alongside them to make school more meaningful and successful for their

children. In the following counter stories I use excerpts from two of the parents' stories to illustrate my construction of a more useful educational strategy than the ones storied in the previous chapters.

Stacey's Experience of School with Me as the Teacher

It was very important for me, given how she was storied as a student, that Darlene begin to see herself as capable and successful. So I made it a top priority to assess her academic strengths at the beginning of the school year. By adapting her program so that she could successfully meet the curricular outcomes and experience academic success, Darlene's behavioural outbursts and incidents of inappropriate actions decreased dramatically. As I made home visits and developed a partnership with Stacey, Darlene very quickly understood that parent and teacher were working together. With the adjustment in Darlene's academic program and the open communication between Stacey, and myself, Darlene and Stacey began to live a very different story of school. School became a positive and affirming place for both parent and child. Stacey explains:

When she had you, I found I could see the real Darlene coming out of her, she felt good about herself. A lot of her teachers did not take the time like you took the time with her. It was so nice to see that when you came, you knew that I was working and you made time in your schedule to see me. To me now, she doesn't have you any more, I find there's no communication.

Stacey appreciated the extra time I spent with Darlene, explaining the program, finding the places where Darlene was excelling, and also acknowledging the difficulties she was having. Stacey appreciated, also, the opportunity to have some input in Darlene's

school life and to have some explanation of education issues regarding Darlene's progress and challenges. The act of my sharing information about Darlene's program and listening to Stacy's past experiences with her daughter's school and teachers was a relief for Stacey. The act of dialogue itself is very respectful. Parents yearn for dialogue with educators. (Freire, 1970; Ryan, 1999) For the first time, Stacy felt that she had a part in Darlene's education and that someone was listening to and validating her legitimate concerns. Active parent participation and purposeful partnership were the objectives. I wanted Stacey to be in the parade with Darlene and me; not just cheering us on by the sideline and watching the parade of school go by as Darlene and I marched (Pushor 2001, Pushor & Murphy 2004a). Stacey reflects:

When you had her, I never heard any complaints, you know, you took the time to say, Okay, this is what this girl needs, let's do it you know. I wish you had never gone.

Partnership and Building Success

Over a short period of time a certain momentum built up in the relationship Stacey, Darlene and I were developing. Incidents of inappropriate behaviour became rare. By communicating to Stacey any concerns I had and also the successes Darlene was experiencing, I believe that I was giving what this young student needed. First and foremost, she was now having an opportunity to be successful in school. Secondly, I demanded her best effort and praised her when she was working hard. Third, I gave her mother, the other person who was deeply concerned about Darlene's progress, a voice and an opportunity to be a partner in Darlene's school life. Stacey became an active

participant who could praise Darlene when she was doing well and also be a powerful source of support when Darlene would experience lapses in appropriate behaviour

I think that's why I kind of really liked when you first came. I never had that (home visit) experience before. Stacey really felt good about Darlene's schooling when she was a student in my class. Stacey had never experienced a teacher making a home visit. She never experienced a teacher who would communicate with her directly about her child's schoolwork and academic progress. For the first time, she stated that she saw a teacher who was as concerned as she was about Darlene's academic level and a teacher who was planning a program that met Darlene's needs so she could move forward and experience some measure of success. Stacey came to understand that I was not going to just push her daughter through the grade. I was not going to be satisfied with merely managing Darlene's behaviour.

A Parent Sees the Possibilities

The time that Darlene spent in my classroom was a wonderful experience for all three of us. I learned that the home-visit parental-inclusion model that I had developed really worked for the benefit of everyone. Darlene made progress, her needs were identified, and she moved forward from a base of strength. Because of her success in school she was less frustrated and developed appropriate behaviours in class and in the school. Darlene enjoyed being a student and being successful amongst her peers. As a teacher I enjoyed the support of an appreciative mother and benefited from her knowledge of Darlene and her interventions when her daughter was experiencing behavioural difficulties. For Stacey, dealing with school and teacher was not at all

stressful. In fact, our working relationship was hopeful. Stacey began to see the possibilities for her daughter—possibilities that she may have perceived before, but which were unable to be realized because of a lack of relationship, communication, and cooperation with a school bureaucracy that traditionally kept parents, and particularly Mi'kmaw parents, at arms length.

Cummins (2001) found that assimilationist schools typically have a hostile or exclusionary relationship with parents. He found that, when schools actively and positively sought out collaborative relationships with minority parents, student achievement increased. In his study, educators were attempting to reverse the assimilationist agenda in a school where Latino students attended. Latino students were underachieving and the school was actively trying to build a relationship with students. As an act of honouring the children's' language and culture, teachers and parents met outside the school to write books in Spanish for the school library. This action alone, of teachers and parents sharing power actually influenced how the Latino students perceived school. Stacey experienced a similar change in perception:

Back when you were teaching her, you made me feel like, wow, I have a teacher here that really cares about my daughter. He is not going to pass her whether she is learning or not. He was not going to shove her through the school system. And like I said, communicating back and forth, I find that is essential because without it, all of a sudden the report card comes home and you are in a big shock. I find like, to me now that she doesn't have you, there's no communication.

Jane's Story of School with Me as the Teacher

I remember having a short meeting of introduction with Jane, at her home, during my first round of home visits. From Gary's cumulative file and his history with teachers, resource professionals, and administrators, it was apparent that he and his family were storied in a certain way. Over the course of the first 4 or 5 months of Gary's year in my classroom, Jane and I had a number of contacts. Jane appreciated my interest in her son. Working together, a relationship of trust and partnership grew over time. Gary came to understand this relationship and the contact that would occur when I needed Jane's help or when I needed information about what was going on in Gary's life outside of school. As the relationship developed, Jane supported my work with Gary and my rising expectations for Gary's schoolwork and his behaviour.

Yeah, I noticed that when he was in your classroom, he looked forward to going to school. I find now he is not as excited to go to school. He looks for excuses as he goes out the door. And I've never really had that problem when he was in your class. I felt that he had a really good rapport with you, he could share with you. I don't think that he can share with all his teachers, I think Gary is selective in who he shares with. And I think that if he trusts you, he will. And I think he trusts you.

Why did Gary become more comfortable with me as his teacher? Was it because he knew that his mother was actively involved in his school life? Was that a comfort to him? Was it a comfort to her? How did regular contact between his mother and his teacher affect Gary's attitude towards school? Jane explains.

He gained a lot of trust and he was able to open up to you. Prior to that, like when you first got a hold of Gary and by the time you finished having Gary, there was a different Gary that emerged. Then after a while there were certain things that you were teaching that I found that a lot of teachers do not teach.

The Impact on Student Performance

I remember Gary's transformation from a disinterested, struggling, behaviourally challenged youth into an engaging productive student as quite dramatic. This transition took a relatively short period of time. I learned from an assessment of his abilities and challenges and also from his mother that Gary was a tactile learner, that he was very expressive, and that he loved to read. He also struggled in math and abhorred writing. In my classroom I had to make a place for Gary to be successful.

When Gary was in my class, both he and Jane experienced school differently from previous grades. As a result of experiencing success, behaviour issues that had been problematic in early grades virtually disappeared. Gary also performed better academically when his strengths, particularly oration and creativity, were encouraged. The experience with school was much more positive and much more engaging. Jane saw a change in Gary's attitude. For Gary, Jane, and me, school was less stressful because there was a sharing of information and a development of trust between teacher, student, and parent.

The partnership worked beautifully. I learned Gary was extremely artistic and loved to draw as a means of expressing himself. I learned that Gary could draw and at the same time listen to instructions or lessons. I was able to establish early on that Gary

was reading above grade level with excellent comprehension, even though his writing was often incoherent and his penmanship almost unreadable. With Jane's participation, I was able to make adaptations to his program and to classroom strategies so Gary could experience success academically. Because of the relationship and communication I had with Jane, Gary understood he could not play one party off against the other. Gary could see that his teacher was interested in his school success because of the time I spent to get to know him and because I learned about him from listening to the person who knew him the best and loved him the most; his mother. Jane felt it was all about trust.

I think he trusts you. I don't think he trusts all his teachers. And I'm not really sure why. But, I usually keep an eye out on it. I was really sad when you weren't teaching the Grade 7. I said, oh my goodness, what am I going to do now Mr. Murphy's not there?

Closing the Distance Between Home and School

In these counter stories, the previous distance between home and school closes as I developed relationships with Stacey and Jane. By visiting their homes and their places of work on the Reserve, I gave up the ground which positioned me as all-knowing, and expert, and I gave up the power associated with that positioning. I was using collaborative rather than coercive forms of power (Corson, 1997; Cummins, 2001; Ryan, 1999).

Off the landscape of the school, the parents and I came together to share what we knew about the children. It was my knowledge of the children at school and my knowledge of teaching and learning. In these conversations, the parents, too, were part of

the process. It was their personal, practical knowledge—knowledge of their children’s lives, their strengths, their histories, and their challenges. Stacey and Jane were positioned as rightful participants in their children’s schooling, partners who had important information to contribute.

Appropriate Programming while Affirming Cultural Identity

In my counter stories with Stacey and Jane, “heavy” decisions were made together with the parents. When something came up in the classroom with Darlene or Gary, when I felt I needed help or information, when decisions needed to be made, I made a home or work visit. I recognized the parents held important knowledge about their children, and I asked them to lay that knowledge alongside my own as teacher. In creating a bigger picture of the child, I was able to make more thoughtful programming decisions for Darlene and Gary, and we were able to raise our expectations of the children, both academically and behaviourally.

Moving away from a story of blame, and looking for ways to create success opportunities for Darlene and Gary, I made it a priority to attend to the students’ academic profiles. Both parents observed the shift this created for their children. Stacey believes “the real Darlene” came out in my classroom and Jane commented on how Gary looked forward to going to school that year. Both mothers spoke of caring and concern, of trust and rapport. They saw these qualities expressed and lived through my focus on the essential work of a teacher; strong and appropriate academic programming while affirming the students’ full identity.

Moving Away From Blaming and Shaming

In my classroom, it was no longer a story of bad behaviour, that was being lived, nor a story of shaming and blaming that moved from teacher to parent to child. It was no longer a story of deficiency but a story of strength. Stacey no longer felt Darlene was being shoved through the system but could see her learning unfolding. Jane and I began to focus on Gary's artwork and his strong comprehension as places of strength from which to build a program. The cycle of negativity was interrupted. The distancing of Mi'kmaw children and parents from the process of schooling – and from teachers – was interrupted. Increased competence contributed to increased confidence, which led to further competence, and an upward spiral of affirmation was created (Fine, Powell, and Weis, 1997).

Counter stories—stories lived by the parents in relationship with me—are stories of an educator engaged in a process of unlearning, of an educator and parents working side-by-side on a school landscape. These counter stories raise questions about the currently held acceptance of educators' position on the landscape of school in relation to students and their parents. It is the position that privileges teacher knowledge over parent knowledge. In these stories, I have found what *can be* when both teacher knowledge and parent knowledge are used to make decisions about students' academic and behavioural programming. My counter stories illustrate how the artificial dichotomies of right and wrong answers, of responsible and irresponsible parents, of good and bad neighbourhoods, or of knowing educators and unknowing parents disappear when both educators and parents work in partnership. When educators no longer begin by assuming

parent and student deficiency, they no longer need to act as protectors and can move into new ways of working together with the parents and children.

Conclusion

From my research findings, I believe parents are seeking opportunities to tell their stories to their children's teachers and to make their parent knowledge visible. From these parent stories, I believe new possibilities can emerge which have the potential of placing educators and parents side-by-side in reform efforts, and side-by-side on school landscapes.

For the present school landscape, however, I am left with Stacey's comment: *I find like, to me now that she doesn't have you there is no communication.* It appears that since the time of my effort to provide a counter story experience for Stacey's daughter Darlene, the cycle of poor performance and behaviour issues came to the fore once again. Stacey and Darlene's school experience with me was but a brief interruption, a break on an otherwise arduous, predictable path of underachievement. Although Darlene and Gary and Kathy passed smoothly and successfully through my class, the benefits they realized were short term. In retrospect, I feel like an island in the sea; my methods, my approach, which appeared to be so successful with children who were labeled as academically weak and behaviourally challenged and with parents who were positioned as difficult and irresponsible, did not become systemic. This type of outreach, parental sharing, and accommodation of children's needs does not appear to be practiced outside my classroom.

Implications of the Research

This research tells us that the distance between non-Mi'kmaw and Mi'kmaw families needs to decrease. I concluded that we need to come to know each other to find ways to facilitate knowing places. The home visit is one way but I believe other avenues may also work if explored. This research tells us that we need more agency on the part of teachers and administrators. I believe we must move away from the blaming and shaming and ask what can we do differently, how can our practice change?

Teachers need places and spaces to think about and inquire into their practice within a learning community. The masters program provided this space for me and it heightened my consciousness of what I do as an educator. This experience; working with these mothers, hearing their stories, searching for meaning in their retelling, and reading the literature, changed my optic into hopefulness rather than chronic despair.

I believe there needs to be more research conversations. Teachers have much to learn from what others can tell them. Schools rarely ask the people closest to the learning—the students and the parents— about how it is going. Research methodologies such as narrative inquiry open up possibilities to build on what is actually appropriate. This approach allows the voices of those seldom heard to inform teachers' work.

Conditions for Successful Parental Inclusion

My research has led me to ask if positive, meaningful, and systemic change around parental inclusion can be made. To answer this question, I must return to the three conditions identified by Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler (1997) and Hoover-Dempsey and

Jones (1997) that influence the decisions by parents (most often mothers) to become involved in their children's education. The first condition is the perception of a parent about what they are supposed to do for their children to help them achieve education outcomes. The second element pertains to the extent to which the parents believe they can have a positive influence on their children's performance in school. The third element is the degree to which both the children and the school welcome, invite, and/or demand the participation of parents in school. For each condition, I examine whether or how I created an environment where those conditions existed.

Given the degree to which I welcomed, invited, and/or demanded the participation of those Mi'kmaw mothers in school, there is clearly a desire on their part to be supportive and contributing to their child's school success when they are invited to do so in real and meaningful ways. As a teacher, I welcomed input and valued parent knowledge, and I did it off the landscape of school, away from my power base (school) and in the parent space (home). This was particularly important, given that for many Aboriginal parents, particularly those who attended the residential schools, schooling was not a positive, affirming experience. The continuing legacy of educating Mi'kmaw children in provincial public schools has not been particularly hopeful or positive (Task Force, 2000). For some, the trauma associated with that lingers to the present.

Conditions for parental inclusion also pertain to the extent to which those parents believed they could have a positive influence on their child's performance in school. I believe that I was able to empower these parents and convince them that their input was welcomed, valued, and incorporated into their children's programming. Finally, because meaningful communication and trust developed over time, I was able to inform and guide

parents in what they could do for their children to help them achieve educational outcomes while at the same time affirming their children's identity. This included working in partnership with me to identify strengths and support positive and appropriate classroom behaviour. These actions, I believe, involved meaningful two-way communication that developed into trust

Epstein (1995) argues that the way schools care about children is reflected in the way schools care about families. Parental involvement is a function of the extent to which families and schools work together in partnership. Do we welcome a child into the school environment or do we welcome the whole family (Pushor 2001)? After listening to the stories of these women (stories in which I was a central figure), I believe that I was able to cultivate an environment, which welcomed families. By being with them in their homes off the landscape of school, I welcomed parents in a sincere way, to participate in their children's education. Secondly, through dialogue and partnership, I was guiding these women, helping them to identify effective ways of assisting their children to be successful in school through a more productive and efficient relationship with me, their teacher. Finally, by welcoming their active and purposeful participation, by creating conditions for their active and meaningful involvement, these parents came to believe that their working relationship with me was achieving positive results. With all three women and their children, over time, the relationships became more and more successful.

The title of this master's thesis, Untapped Riches, How the Stories of Mi'kmaw Mothers Should Inform Educational Practices in Public Schools, encapsulates the reality regarding this journey I have taken as a narrative inquiry researcher. Hearing the stories

of these women, with whom I shared many of the educational experiences told, was for me, a profound personal journey of learning and enlightenment. Reviewing the literature and incorporating it into this work; sharing and talking about these stories with advisors and colleagues; and reflecting on my own evolution as a professional educator, have affected me in a most positive way. This exercise has given me an opportunity to examine my practice as an educator of Mi'kmaw children. I was using a methodology that worked for the children and families in my care. I believe that in my practice I was teaching in a culturally responsive way. By moving off the landscape of school and on to the reserve and into the homes of the families of my students, I was able to minimize the conflicts between the cultural systems of Mi'kmaw families and the cultural system of a Eurocentric school (Gay, 2005).

In my evolution as an educator, I think I made an ethic of caring central to my practice. I believe that caring is embedded among most human interactions. However, caring has become cliché for too many educators. Gay (2005) claims that caring must have a critical political edge. She argues that educators cannot, on the one hand, say they care about the students, and on the other hand, live in good conscience with the unacceptable high rates of failure among minority students. To care is to act, to interpret (Fine, Weiss, Powell, 1997) the policies, practices and attitudes which disempower Mi'kmaw children.

Caring is an action driven by emotion and it was an essential element of the child and family-centred education I practiced. As a teacher who cared, I was not going to let my students fail; failure was not an option. If visiting children with their families in their homes on the reserve was a way to improve the performance of my students, then that

was what would have to be done no matter how unorthodox or unwise my peers thought such action was. Visiting families in their homes to talk about their child's programming and how parents could be active motivators of their children, fostered trust and meaningful communication. I learned much about the children and their culture.

As a teacher it was and is my job to accommodate diverse students and to teach them the skills they need for success in school and in life. Teaching in a culturally responsive way was a negotiating, compromising process where I tried to have parents as authentic participants in how decisions were being made. I believe that this effort to include parents in a meaningful and purposeful way displayed my critical ethic of care. I am confident that it was respectful of my students, their parents, and me.

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Appendix 1

Participant Consent Form

To:

From: Bill Murphy

Date:

Dear

As you are aware, I am currently working on a Master's Degree in Education at St. Francis Xavier University. Since I believe you have valuable insight, I would like to invite you to participate in the research. Your participation in this research is voluntary and you may withdraw at any time for any reason without penalty by simply informing myself, Bill Murphy, the principal investigator, verbally or in writing. All information collected during the study will be held in strict confidence. Different names will be used so your identity, the identity of others and the identity of the school your children are or have attended will be protected. You will have an opportunity to read and respond to transcripts of our taped conversations. As I progress through the writing of my thesis, I will also seek response and clarification from you. Your participation in the study will be very important for all educators as we strive to make our school systems more inclusive of parent participation.

It is important that you understand that by signing the consent form, the following will apply:

- I understand that the participant understands that the taped interview will be transcribed and the information will be kept confidential.
- I understand that the transcript of the interview will not be identified with my name, but that a number or different name will be used. My identity and number will be kept confidential by the researcher.
- I understand that the tape and the transcript will be kept in a safe place. If I should choose to withdraw from the study, the data I have provided will be destroyed immediately.
- I realize that my name will not appear in any report of this study unless I give my explicit written permission.
- No identifying information will be included in any document resulting from this study.
- I understand that the researcher will meet with me a number of times over the course of the six-month period.

- I understand that my participation in this study is entirely voluntary.
- I understand that I may withdraw from the study at any time by notifying the researcher verbally or in writing.
- I have the right for the taping to be stopped at any point I request.
- I understand that I may refuse to answer any questions without having to terminate my involvement in the research project.
- I understand that the collected data will be kept for two years after the completion of the study and it will then be destroyed.
- I have read this consent form and have had all my questions about the study answered.

I have attached a one-page summary of my project a one-page summary of my project to give you more information. Please feel free to ask me further questions regarding the study at any time. My supervisor for this research project is Dr. Debbie Pushor. During the course of the investigation, if you have any questions or concerns that you may be uncomfortable raising with me, please feel free to contact Dr. Debbie Pushor by phone at 867-2247 or by mail at School of Education, St Francis Xavier University, Antigonish Nova Scotia, B2G 2W5. Your help with this project is greatly appreciated.

Sincerely,

Bill Murphy

I have read the information above and I am willing to participate in this study.

Name (Please print): _____

Signature: _____

Date: _____

