

**When Aboriginal and Métis  
Teachers use Storytelling  
as an  
Instructional Practice**

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**2006**

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**Research Area: Cultural Affirmation and School Climate**

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## From the Heart of a Teacher

Good teachers possess a capacity for connectedness. They are able to weave a complex web of connections among themselves, their subjects, and their students so that students can learn to weave a world for themselves. The methods used by these weavers vary widely: lectures, Socratic dialogues, laboratory experiments, collaborative problem solving, creative chaos. The connections made by good teachers are held not in their methods but in their hearts—meaning *heart* in the ancient sense, as the place where intellect and emotion and spirit and will converge in the human self.

As good teachers weave the fabric that joins them with students and subjects, the heart is on the loom on which the threads are tied, the tension is held, the shuttle flies, and the fabric is stretched tight. Small wonder, then, that teaching tugs at the heart, even breaks the heart—The more one loves teaching, the more heartbreaking it can be. The courage to teach is the courage to keep one's heart open in those very moments when the heart is asked to hold more than it is able so that teacher and students and subject can be woven into the fabric of community that learning, and living, require.

(Palmer, 1998, p. 11)

## Executive Summary

In traditional times, storytelling was used for many reasons---to teach values, beliefs, morals, history, and life skills in Indigenous communities. Storytelling still holds value as it has become a powerful and interactive instructional tool in today's classrooms. In this naturalistic research study, the co-researchers used conversational interviewing to explicate how teachers use storytelling as a teaching practice throughout the curriculum in elementary, middle, and secondary schools. Seven First Nations and Métis teacher-participants were asked how, why and when storytelling was integral to their professional practices.

The findings reveal that storytelling Indigenizes the curriculum. First Nations and Métis teachers do not strive to represent Indigenous knowledge; instead, they incorporated Indigenous ways of teaching within the socially constructed context of their lessons to be more culturally responsive to each and every student. In using storytelling, they became institutional agents by providing analogies or connections to ideas that students can understand, so that learning is meaningful and transformative. Through sharing stories, the lessons carried a deeper, implicit, or multi-layered message that illustrated shared values. Storytelling created a climate that is responsive to the individual needs of the classroom while making analogies explicit to prior learning.

The findings also suggest that storytelling was reciprocal. Classrooms became a community of storytellers as stories stand on the shoulders of other stories. As teachers shared personal stories of their experiences, the students responded by sharing their own stories within a caring classroom of trusting relationships. In this way, storytelling created a dynamic of interactive shared learning and equality of learners. Personal storytelling changes the classroom

from having one expert opinion to many voices of experience. A key factor in the development of close sharing was trusting relationships and respect for others. What was important is not just students' respect for teachers, but rather the teachers unconditional respect for each and every student.

This study speaks to the need that in educating students, First Nations and Metis teachers became learners of and teachers of their students. They centered their instruction more on the lives and activities of the students first, and secondly on making links to the content. Teaching was about building relationships rather than finding an endless list of best practices as a panacea for instruction. A caring community was the starting point for effective instruction. In this report, the following themes are addressed:

- ◆ storytelling fosters a caring community;
- ◆ storytelling is teaching through analogy;
- ◆ storytelling Indigenizing the curriculum;
- ◆ storytelling facilitates culturally responsive teaching and
- ◆ storytelling professionalizes teachers.

The teachers in this study had the courage to teach; teaching was teaching from the heart. In adding storytelling to their professional praxis, the First Nations and Métis teachers honored their ancestors and the traditional ways of teaching their people.



## Storytelling as a Way of Knowing

Stories hold the key to the traditions, the rituals, and the social ways of Indigenous passed on messages about loyalty, respect, responsibility, honesty, humility, trust, and sharing—all those qualities that helped them within the relationships in their daily lives. Storytelling was much more than a pastime. Storytelling was a social institution, an “oral university” that taught people young and old about being “human” -- that is, how to function in the community. Traditional repertoires of oral tales embody systems of belief and guiding principles of personal behavior that are as relevant today as they were in centuries past (Cruikshank, 1990, p.x). In today’s communities, storytelling can be an important teaching strategy as it creates bonds, increases listening skills, and fosters communication. Unlike the passivity of television and videos which are pervasive in the child and youth culture, storytelling is interactive. Television and videos are one-way communication, whereas, storytelling by its very nature is a two-way communication. Storytelling is mouth-to-ear, eye-to-eye, and face-to-face communication that answers questions about our daily lives. The stories we tell and retell about our significant small moments or big ideas help us return to moments that mark us in some way, to search for a moment’s meaning, or to repeat its meaning to ourselves or our students.

Sharing stories create classroom connections. They produce a relationship between the storytellers and the listeners, as well as becoming stories belonging to a classroom community. The stories that are shared evolve from the lives that are brought together in forming a community of learners. In the Pulitzer Prize Poet, Lisel Mueller’s poem “Why we tell stories?” (1980), a verse states we tell stories “because the story of our life becomes our life. Because each one of us tells the same story but tells it differently and none of us tells it the same way twice....” We all live through our stories and the stories live through us. Storytelling is never the same way twice, even when the same words are used, because the dialogical relationship is always shifting. Thus, stories are dynamic rather than static. Depending on who is listening there are many different messages that can be received. Stories have many layers of meaning,

giving the listener the responsibility to listen, reflect and then interpret the message. “Stories incorporate several possible explanations for phenomena, allowing the listeners to creatively expand their thinking processes so that for each problem they encounter in life it can be viewed from a variety of angles before a solution is reached” (Lanigan, 1998, p.113). The community created by the teacher and students will determine the dynamics of the stories being told and shared.

## Doing Research

Using naturalistic inquiry (*studying people in their own environments*), the research team interviewed seven (7) classroom teachers of First Nations <sup>1</sup> or Métis <sup>2</sup> ancestry, from two Saskatchewan school divisions, who use storytelling in their professional practice. By exploring storytelling practices in natural settings, what and how it means, the study was guided by the following overarching research question: *How do First Nations or Métis teachers use storytelling to create a more culturally relevant and empowering learning environment?* Additionally, the teachers were invited to examine their own positions about issues of professional practice including issues of institutional power and privilege which may be unacknowledged but needed as they became the *learners of and teachers of* students.

## Data Gathering

To elicit a rich understanding of the First Nations and Métis teacher-participants’ way of thinking, in-depth interviews were used. These interviews were less structured than a typical interview and involved the researcher probing into topics that the participant may

- 1        Rather than use the identifier Aboriginal, the seven participants self-identified as First Nations meaning that they are politically autonomous under the Indian Act.
- 2        The Métis are of mixed blood people, the joining of two worlds ... the new world (North American Aboriginal ) and the old world (Europeans) which created a new nation of people who established their own language and traditions.

bring up to understand their cultural responsive teaching practices. All the conversational interviews were audiotaped to record the thoughts, attitudes, and insights of the participants about the role of storytelling in the rhythm of their professional practice. The researchers were of the belief that if we wish to hear First Nations and Métis teachers' voices, then they must work as collaborators. To do this, the researchers shared control with them, encouraged them to extend their responses, and co-constructed the meanings that become data for later interpretation by the researchers. In keeping with collaborative and respectful research with First Nations and Métis peoples, the audio-taped interviews were transcribed and returned to the participants who were asked to sign a Data Transcript Release Form after checking the transcripts for both clarity and accuracy. Pseudonyms were given to the teacher-participants to respect their rights to anonymity and confidentiality. All additional identifying information about them or their school was removed.

Other techniques used for documenting the teaching practices in the research study were *field notes* (a written account of what the researchers hear, see, experience, and think in data gathering observations about storytelling as some teaching methodologies), and *reflective journals* (which are the researchers' place to record, keep track of and make sense of what has been happening in the field as well to record some reflective memos to oneself or take notes from other research sources such as the theorists) based on the work of Bogdan and Blikien (2002). As we sifted through the data, a kaleidoscope of patterns and connections emerged that illuminated how storytelling was enmeshed in the teaching practices of our First Nations and Métis participants. We choose a kaleidoscope as a metaphor, because the patterns and hues were continually changing and becoming something new, yet all of them remained interwoven and interrelated. In this report, we will address how storytelling fosters a caring community; it is teaching through analogy; Indigenizing the curriculum; facilitating culturally responsive teaching and professionalizing teachers.

## Storytelling fosters a caring community

In global times, childhood is laced with uncertainty. Frequently, school communities are in flux so that the “no-one-knows-me” becomes the familiar pattern of a student’s relationship to classmates. Schools serve as a learning community but it also is a community where students share their identity and belong to a kid’s network (Wason-Ellam & Li, 1999). These networks draw membership from familiarity with the latest television programs, video games, movies, computer games, media-linked toys, or sports icons. Students can be strangers as they enter in a new school or they can be strangers by virtue of their difference whether it is physical, social, cultural, or racial. A student can be a stranger by remaining within oneself or being at odds with the world. Whatever the reason, strangers live on the boundary between their individual world and the world of the dominant society. Strangers, by their presence, ask something of a school community; they ask for acknowledgement and personal respect (Wason-Ellam, 2001, p.95).

Classroom storytelling creates a community of relationships. Dyson and Genishi (1994) explain, “Within and through stories, we fashion our relationships with others, joining with them, separating them, expressing in ways subtle and not so subtle our feelings about the people around us” (p.3). A storytelling self is a social self, who shapes caring relationships through weaving words and images. Therefore in storytelling, there is “the potential for forging new relationships, including local, classroom ‘cultures’ in which individuals are interconnected and new ‘we’s’ are formed” (p.5). For our participants, the telling of stories created a collaborative community with the teacher and the students functioning together as caring learners. When everyone contributes in the classroom, the classroom community is enhanced. As Simone, a secondary teacher, reveals “...it’s a way to connect with the kids, so then you get that sense of belonging” (p.1). In her classroom, each story that is contributed becomes a resource that the community can add to their own warehouse of knowledge. “As students share their concerns, desires, fears, accomplishments through their stories, they become members of what Bruner calls a ‘culture creating community’ ” (Collins & Cooper, 1997, p.4). The use of a story also changes the

dynamics in the classroom by creating “an open learning community” (hooks, 1994, p.8). hooks argues, “Seeing the classroom always as a communal place enhances the likelihood of collective effort in creating and sustaining a learning community” (p.8). Therefore, the sharing of personal stories, became “the glue that holds together a diverse set of community members, giving them a common language experience along with a deeper understanding of one another” (Trousdale, Woestehoff, & Schwartz, 1994, p. ix).

In this study, storytelling promoted a caring and intimate atmosphere in all the classrooms. According to Patricia:

*I think I've come to realize that an area of strength for me is setting a classroom climate where it's empathic,... kind, and trusting. I think it's because of telling stories and saying this is how I am and this is what I believe. That sort of sets the tone for the class ( p.9).*

To start the school year Patricia, a middle years teacher in the inner-city, begins by sharing what she calls a “me bag,” a bag of special mementos and artifacts that are meaningful and personal in her life. She would take each item and tell the students why it was important to her and why it was in her “me bag.” “I did that just so the kids could get to know me, and then I would ask them to do one” (p.1). Patricia shares these objects as a way to inform her students of her life as storied events. She models not only the importance of personal stories and their significance in a community, but also how we can learn from one another through story. Afterwards, the students have the opportunity to share their own “me bag.”

*When the first person goes to tell their story, or does their 'me bag,' I say to them, do you remember how supportive you were to me?... How respectful?... That's what you need to give to your classmates as well ( p.15).*

In the process students are empowered as the sharing of personal stories validates their experiences and themselves. Patricia remarks “I really like to get know the kids. ...informally, I'm

*always bearing stories*” ( p.2). She points out that beyond the use of the “me bag” she values the usage of stories as a means to connect with the lives of her students. To work with students, *“that connection has to be there, that relationship has to be built”* (p.2).

The use of a story in the classroom allows students to reveal their knowledge and have others recognize them for being knowledgeable. It also provides an opportunity for their ways of knowing to be honoured and respected in the classroom. “As educators, we need to have the capacity to value all children by valuing the connections they make with the stories teachers tell, which can enable children to succeed academically, emotionally and in life” (Cardwell, 2002, p.85) Giroux (1992) claims, that although students have limited experiences, there is no denying that any or all of their experiences are relevant to learning. “Students have memories, families, religions, feelings, languages and cultures that give them a distinctive voice” (p.17). In this way, the teacher moves away from being the expert or the only person who can dispense knowledge and cedes power-sharing with the students.

The teacher’s willingness to listen to the students’ stories establishes that their knowledge is limitless and that we can learn from one another. We can read information in a text, but when personal experience is shared the listeners have the chance to become witnesses to that experience. It imparts another perspective that may not have been available if written in a text. Willingness to listen shows that the teacher cares about what the student is sharing and is interested in their ideas, thoughts and experiences. Storytelling *“creates a whole milieu of everybody telling stories and allowing them to feel like they’re being heard as well”* (Simone, p. 1). It provides a validation for their knowledge and experience and gives authority to them from someone in a position of power.

Noddings’ (1984) concept of “authentic caring” or genuinely reciprocal, respectful relations between students and teachers is useful in analyzing the First Nations and Métis teachers’ approach to teaching. The positive social, emotional, and academic development of students depends, to a considerable degree, on whether the contexts in which they develop,

including schools, are reliable sources of caring relationships (Noddings 1992, 1984). And personal storytelling can create that environment. The use of a story as a teaching strategy demonstrates how the teachers are willing to respond to the needs of their students in validating their experiences. The students react by always wanting to share their own stories in the safe, caring environment the teacher has created. As Patricia explained:

*You have to be somewhat setting the stage before they tell their stories. We talk about trust, and we talk about kindness, and empathy before they share their personal stories because they have to have an environment where it is safe to do so because sometimes you just never know what you are going to get out of a story ( p.8).*

Because Patricia has been willing to risk herself by unleashing her stories into the community, her students are willing to also make themselves vulnerable. She describes the use of story as “...non-threatening because it’s your own. When it’s them telling a story, either they have created it, they’ve lived it, they’ve heard it, so it’s not a wrong or right answer” (p.11). Likewise, Queedum, a primary teacher, adds that storytelling is where the “*Métis kids will come out more...they will share, not just with me, but with the whole class because the comfort level is there*” (p.4). The use of story not only validates the students’ experience, but also gives them authority of that experience, a place where they are knowledgeable and others can learn from them. This ownership provides student agency or the sense that if they act, and act strategically, they can accomplish their goals.

First Nations and Métis culture stresses respect for elders who are highly regarded for their wisdom and knowledge. Similarly there is the same respect for teachers. In their teaching practice, the teacher-participants bond with and respond to the personal needs of students in their willingness to share stories and listen to theirs. Respect is reciprocal. Mary believes, “*If you’re willing to tell them something personal about yourself and put it out there, then they’re willing to do the same*” (p.1). Stella has also found that her willingness to share stories creates an open community where the students are willing to share in turn. “*I think that if the teacher is willing to show parts of yourself to your students, then your students are more apt to show parts of themselves to you*” (p.3).

Patricia is in agreement. *“If you are not willing to tell stories, or if you’re not willing to listen to stories you are never going to get the whole feel of the kids that you work with”* (p.13). She upholds her ideal, *“I want to get to know them and the best way is to listen”* (p.13). Personal sharing makes teachers somewhat vulnerable for it exposes them to the world. When teachers insert an oral story in the lesson, they fully engage themselves in the lives of their students and the storying becomes reciprocal. The learning and growth that occur as multiple voices join in searching for conversation is worth the effort (Hole, 2003, p.49). As Queedum says, *“...they will share, not just with me, but with the whole class because the comfort level is there”* (p.4).

In this study, the First Nations and Métis teachers played a key role in creating an environment that is not only safe for storytelling but also an open space. The teachers modelled storytelling. Talking about life, the family stories that make lives so unique, it is all about you and not someone else. That is why it is important for First Nations and Métis students to value oral stories - their oral traditions-because it announces to them and others who they are (Meyer, 1996, p.140). Oral stories set the stage for understanding the traditions that extend the meaning of classrooms as community. Throughout each storytelling, the teachers take ideas and give them shape, a body through human voice. Through vibrant and creative language, they give life and texture to ideas. Through that language they make those ideas walk, fly or shine; they share their feelings, knowledge and memories. What is most important is their stories are teaching lessons. Although dates and facts are not necessarily included, the oral tradition speaks the truth and the heart of the meaning stays alive from mouth to ear.

Regrettably, in today's schools, caring is rarely placed at the center of policies and practices (Noddings 1995). Instead, teachers are under pressure to increase students' academic performance, as measured by high-stakes standardized tests (Kohn, 2000). Finding spaces for caring dialogue is becoming increasingly difficult as teachers, and students are pushed toward predetermined goals set by distant administrators.



## Storytelling is teaching through analogy

Storytelling builds conceptual bridges between student's own experiences and new knowledge. For First Nations and Métis teachers, storytelling is a fundamental communicative pattern. Like their ancestors before them, they use story as analogy to explain the relationships with people and the natural world (Bighead, 1997, p. 81). Analogy suggests that meaning is at the heart of all learning. To make meaning, we make sense of something outside our experiences by pairing it with something known. Nevertheless, one thing is not taken for another-it's not a matter of substitution-but is a meaningful pairing.

Cajete (1994) advocates that teachers involved in Indigenous education “practice contexting information in culturally sensitive and holistic ways” (p.139). Because Indigenous students are frequently raised in an oral culture, more value is placed on orality. It is unusual to use books as “authorities” for it is the elders or older people who are counselled about questions that involve obtaining authoritative answers. Thus if you wanted to find information in an Indigenous community you would go to an individual rather than a book (Harris, 1987). Grandparents, parents, aunts and uncles always had an oral story to context, teach or to share expectations. Their stories “contexted” implicit messages about being loyal, responsible or respectful—qualities that helped Indigenous peoples live worthy lives. Stella, a middle years teacher, asserts that the key reason for doing storytelling is to transform an abstract concept to one that may be more recognizable to the student. She enjoys sharing with her students personal narratives, or contexting what she likes to call “*stories of remembering*” (p.1). Whenever she is about to start a lesson, it always begins with a story-- stories of being brought up Métis, stories of jigging, visiting an auntie's farm or listening to the fiddle. The willingness to share from her own experience and from her family comes from her desire to make accessible for her students an analogy of a differing experience. Stella remarks that in her teaching experience many of the students are unaware of lives outside their own area of the city. “*They have no clue about abuse, they have no clue about poverty. What they see, it's not their fault, they have just never lived it.*” (p.2). It is here that she mines her story repertoire from the seeds of personal or family experiences to

enlighten her students about reality to make connections to resilience and survival. *“I would tell stories about how my Dad grew up without money and had thirteen kids in the family, or how shocked I was that when I started teaching and kids didn’t have shoes. So that is a big use of storytelling” to bring in different perspectives”* (p.2).

Riddington (1990) comments that “a person who speaks from the authority of his or her own experience ‘little bit know something’... empowers a person to live...with intelligence and understanding” (p. xv). When John teaches religion to his middle years students, he uses a story as an analogy. *“The stories are, for me, getting them to connect, whether it’s with me or with the story or the concept, and for me to tell stories, they can see or understand maybe more”* (p.118). He states, *“I’m thinking for almost all the subject areas I can make the connection for using the stories because that’s one way I like to get them to connect to what we’re talking about”* (p.7). It is his intention that the students will in time connect with the message because in Indigenous stories, messages are often implicit:

*...story might not affect them right today, they might not get it, but if they remember what the story is three years down the road, they may be in a situation where this happens, they have something they can help them, hopefully, make a good decision, or do something to help them. Or be able to say, okay, I’ve heard about this before* (p. 18).

Mary, who teaches in a secondary school, revealed how she used storytelling to help her students learn new concepts through association *“... First they have to associate the new...with something they know, and second they have...to be able to imagine the thing that they’re learning. I think it piques their curiosity”* ( p. 1).

Cajete expresses the belief that story is central to making meaning:

Making story the basis of teaching and learning provides one of the best ways to accomplish...contexting and enhancing of meaning in all areas of the content. It is possible to teach all content from the basis of story (1994, p. 139)

In her discussion of the merits of storytelling Queedum says:

*I always make it a teachable moment. The other day we were talking about how words affect others, and I could reflect back when I came from the North to the City and live here, and I told them how I was treated, and even though I was quite young, how those words stuck with me all those years” (p.1).*

Similarly, Stella stated that “*The personal stories have more of an impact than doing a novel study on a social issue*” (p.6). She believes that students gain knowledge as they “context” through stories.

*I think they learn about different culture for one thing..... And I think they also learn that I was a teenager once, too, and I made mistakes and I learned things. I think they just learn that teachers are people, too, that have had a full world of experience and that they are worth listening to (p.6).*

## **Storytelling Indigenizes the curriculum**

Storytelling has its roots in the attempt to explain life or the mysteries of the world and the universe--to try to make sense out of things. A story could always be told that would help a parent teach or explain some aspect of life or what the consequences of their behavior would be. Storytelling time was a time for the family to be together; it was a time for the elders to explain history to the children and for learning, listening, interacting, and sharing.

In present day, storytelling still holds value as it is an empowering link to a sense of identity and the traditional knowledge of Indigenous peoples. Anderson (2000) says,

Indigenous stories are significant because they are anchors of resistance. They are also ways of preserving the language and the power and meaningfulness of the spoken word....they are critical for Native people who seek an identity

founded within Native culture (p. 131).

Gunn Allen (1986) points out that since the coming of Anglo-Europeans:

...the fragile web of identity that long held tribal people secure has gradually been weakened and torn but the oral tradition has prevented the complete destruction of the web, the ultimate disruption of tribal ways. The oral tradition is vital; it heals itself and the tribal web by adapting to the flow of the present while never relinquishing its connection to the past (p.45).

When advocating the power of the oral tradition, Dyson & Genishi (1994) agree, “Stories are an important tool for proclaiming ourselves as cultural beings” (p.4). The purposes of stories are many. They serve to teach, heal, entertain and document lives (Collins & Cooper, 1997). “Oral traditions are part of our backgrounds. Families have stories and share these stories as a way of bonding, passing along family history, and perpetuating values and ideas” (Meyer, 1996, p.142). It is understandable that First Nations and Métis Teachers continue to use storytelling as a versatile teaching tool and strategy.

Storytelling preserves the Indigenous culture. For First Nations peoples, story is a way to discover traditions and history while learning about ceremony, ritual, and the natural world. Storytelling is much more than a pastime. It is a social institution, an “oral university” that teaches people, young and old, how to be “human” -- that is, how to function in society. According to Susag (1998), education has affected young people of First Nations heritage, “especially those who have been separated from their ancestral landscapes and communities” (p.5). She believes that students have the right “to locate their identities in the stories and experiences of those who have gone before....” Establishing identity raises some critical queries:

What happens to children who do not hear the stories of their own people?  
How do they learn to value, what do they learn to reject, and what do they learn about survival when they don't ever hear or read about the suffering, loss, and

endurance of their own people? How do they establish positive identities for themselves when voices within their culture are ignored, twisted, and suppressed and when voices outside of their culture decide for them who they are and who they should become (p. 5)?

Despite the fact that many families are disconnected from their land and do not practice their traditional ways, the cultural roots lie dormant waiting to sprout again. Storytelling has the ability to fill the gaps in the present documentation of the lives of Métis and First Nation people. *“Before we ever participated in the hoop dancing and the jingle dance, we had to learn where they came from. We didn’t just do them. We had to learn the story behind them as well”* (Patricia, p.13). Cruickshank (1998) refers to this process as the “open ended possibilities” of oral history (p.72), learning the traditions. “The lessons taught through listening to Indigenous stories, both traditionally and contemporary, have never been more needed in the classrooms. The stories remember histories or daily events in Northern communities that otherwise would have been forgotten. Bruchac (1998) adds, “They teach us... the importance of community generosity, the importance of the individual, and the balancing virtues of courage and compassion, self-respect and self-control” (p.ix).

Simone comments about how she mentors her students:

*A lot of them have issues with regards to drugs and alcohol, crime, connections to gangs, the whole gamut.... my storytelling is more based on trying to get them to see that there’s more to life than maybe what they’re experiencing, and they have other choices, because many of them don’t feel that they have choices* (p.8).

And that’s where the storytelling dovetails with Simone’s professional practices. *“Hopefully they can see that there are other options. To motivate, to instill ideas, to try and help them to set dreams rather than just accepting that this is what it is”* (Simone, p.8). Like the traditional “Auntie,” Simone serves not only as the teacher mentor, but she is a significant and caring other in the lives of her students. This practice recalls the close-knit kinship structure of a traditional First Nations or Métis community where everyone was dependent upon everyone else for support and survival. Parental

roles blurred as each relative assumed responsibility for the child-rearing role in the collective guiding, consoling, and teaching of all children. The child was regarded as inheritor of the traditions being passed forward.

Similarly, Queedum follows the pathway of her ancestors by retelling long ago stories that she heard her family told her, *“I have that experience. I’ve got the living experience, and I share that with my students. It’s basically my life is really an open book to my students”* (p.2). Stories of her mother picking rocks, her grandfather trapping, living on the reserve, then coming to an urban school and experiencing poverty engage her students as these become stories of resilience, stories of hope, stories of triumph. Students in her classes were given the opportunity of gaining insight into aspects of being human. In so doing, story is brought back into the everyday lives of Indigenous peoples-reconnecting intergenerational ties and being infused into the lifelong process of affirming an First Nations or Métis identity.

All of the teacher-participants in this study talked about how stories told by the teacher spawned stories by the students about their lives as lived. When teacher-participants would start each story with *“I remember the time....”* eventually students turned to others and simply talked. They saw many “times” come to the surface echoing the “small moments and the big ideas of their life” (Wason-Ellam, 2001). The storied experiences help students to see each other as individuals, often uniquely different and realize what they might share in common. Telling a story triggers others. One tale reminds someone of theirs, which may in turn remind others or of more details from a previous one. Storytelling provides an opportunity for the uncovering of a new way of knowing.

Collins and Cooper (1994) define storytelling as “a folk art form, meaning it is an art form of the people. It is part of the fabric of our lives” (p.24). The interwoven stories that we hear from our Kokum (Cree word for grandmother), Moshum (Cree word for grandfather) or teachers give students an historic glimpse into the lives of others. Meyer (1996) discloses the value of these oral traditions in this way:

Talk about your life, the stories that make your family so unique, your experiences, and how you got to be you and not someone else. It's important that we value our oral stories -our oral traditions- because they tell us and others who we are. They set the stage for understanding oral traditions that develop in our classrooms (p.140).

Storytelling also creates a venue for teachers to share their own narratives. Teachers can use their own experiences to highlight a particular concept they are teaching their students. The use of storying in the classroom allows students and teachers to witness the validity of their own experience. For true learning, story knowledge is essential. Storying is experiential and cultural knowing. It is the best means available for students to organize their experiences and make meaning for themselves (Collins & Cooper, 1997, p. 4).

The personal stories that teachers share reveal to their students a lived experience to which many can relate to. It also provides students with an opportunity to listen about a life that may be quite different from their own. The narrative provides a chance for the speaker and listener to align the past with the present.

A study of stories that dominate in a culture at any particular time provides rich evidence of the values and social practices of that culture. Stories can show us whose histories have been authorized and whose have been silenced; whose lives have been acclaimed and whose have been devalued; whose names we will remember and whose we will never know. Stories can also show us how cultures have 'read,' and thus given meaning to human relationships: how they have made sense of such diverse activities as reproduction, aggression, love, and anger; how they have sorted the flux of human experience into orders and sequences; how they have made decisions about what counts as 'living happily ever after' and what counts as 'living unhappily ever after' (Gilbert, 1994, p.128).

Eileen, another primary teacher, states that she uses storytelling to connect to First Nations and Métis culture. *“When I talk about health, science, social, I tend to try and tie in the similarities....”* In science she relates,... *“how the Aboriginal people would use different plants for medicine. But, they also have to know that a lot of the contemporary medicine that non-Aboriginals use in the hospitals... were developed by the Aboriginal people”*....(p.8). Likewise for Stella who stated that “I was talking about going up to Batoche Days, they didn’t know what Batoche Days was.”<sup>3</sup> Stella took it upon herself to scaffold learning about the history of Indigenous peoples. When the teacher optimizes a teachable moment and stops to develop background knowledge, Stella believes, *“I think it just gives them more incentive to learn about other people”* (p.8). Queedum tells stories of successful literacy teaching for Aboriginal and Métis students requires the development of attitudes on the part of schools and teachers that will open the way to acquisition of cultural knowledge, which in time will be brought to bear on learning tasks.

Stories can be appreciated narratives as instances of alternate intellectual systems that can expand students own understandings. Oral and literate cultures manage knowledge in differing ways. In the ordinary living of lives, First Nations and Métis teachers are taking responsibility for many aspects of their cultural knowledge including passing it on to students. Teachers in the study tell stories to share the wisdom of Indigenous traditions. They tell stories to pass on the pleasure and the satisfaction in the ordinary lives or told events of their peoples. In so doing, these stories become the students’ stories, passed on from traditional educators who were our research informants. As Susag (1998) so eloquently says, “by facilitating their growth and understanding of themselves and the worlds around them, teachers can help them confront life with personal dignity, with compassion for themselves and for others, and with hope for a meaningful future” ( p. 6).

Skilled teachers like Patricia develop cross-cultural sensitivities, or cross-cultural ways of knowing, in order to be able to use family or traditional knowledge to optimize learning. In

3 Batoche is an important historical site in the struggle and resistance of the Métis Nation of Saskatchewan



the traditional ways, teaching is not telling. Students learn through demonstration, observation, and careful listening. Rediscovering Indigenous forms of learning means designing learning opportunities that allow students to watch, to listen, to process and try and then to reflect on what they have accomplished. In this methodology, there is no best way. In their own reflections students learn that others accomplish the task in different ways; all ways are acceptable and encouraged. There are multiple ways of learning; the only standard is that everyone is honoured for learning. How different this approach is to the current trend of leveled learners where students are compared “as ahead of or behind their peers.”

Patricia translates the role of teacher in this way:

*I guess I feel like often I'm a facilitator. I'm not the bringer of information and they're the recipients. I guess I look at it as sharing. That's kind of how I operate because that's what works for me. I'm not comfortable standing at the front and giving them information, and them being taking it in and there's no dialogue, no interaction (p.13-14).*

John raises a further point about spirituality, a traditional value in Indigenous communities:

*Just because I'm Catholic doesn't mean I can't practice or do Aboriginal awareness. Because, I mean, for me, spirituality has nothing to do with religion. Spirituality is spirituality. What I feel, whether I call it a god, or a creator, or Buddha, whoever I'm calling, it doesn't really matter (p.1).*

In her work in inner city neighbourhoods, Wason-Ellam (2001) found that stories stood build upon other stories. When teachers shared personal stories, First Nations and Métis students likewise wove stories with threads taken from other stories to splice with stories of berry picking with their Kokum (grandmother) or stories addressing their relationships to kinship and tribe. In sharing with others, voices came alive. In sharing with others, Noddings (1992) points out there

is a recognition of needs, relation, and response (p. 21). MacLean (2004) believes that storytelling is about taking risks. Personal narrative sharing makes us vulnerable as teachers. It exposes you to the world. She believes that when First Nations and Métis teachers use oral story they insert themselves in the lesson. They have fully engaged themselves in the lives of their students. Hole (2003) emphasizes, “Once the story is found, storytelling requires a willingness to share those experiences with others. It requires a desire to search for the value of experiences. It is difficult work, requiring much time and a high tolerance for risk (p.49).

The oral story is a powerful way to bring alive the shared experiences and knowledge in a classroom setting. Oral story has been a way to teach important lessons while keeping your audience entertained. Oral story is potent way to share experiences and ideas. It breeds enthusiasm toward learning (MacLean, 2004, p. 129).

Wason-Ellam (2001) asserts that stories run deep like a river. Stories ford cultural boundaries as a way of remembering, making sense of things, understanding what happens, and even predicting what might be. Cajete (1994) suggests, remembering “is a way to re-know and reclaim a part of your life” (p. 169). Teachers set the example by “sharing the lessons they learned from their own experiences in ways that make children think more deeply about themselves, their classmates, their families and the world in which they live” (Cardwell, 2002, p. 85).

## **Storytelling facilitates cultural responsive teaching**

Culture is central to learning. It plays a role not only in communicating and receiving information, but also in shaping the thinking process of groups and individuals. Culturally responsive teaching is a pedagogy that recognizes the importance of including students’ cultural references in all aspects of learning (Ladson-Billings, 1994) and offers full, equitable access to education for students from all cultures. Ladson-Billings (1995) notes that a key criterion for

culturally responsive teaching is nurturing and supporting competence in both home and school cultures. If teachers use the students' home cultural experiences as a foundation upon which to develop knowledge and skills, content learned in this way is more significant to the students and facilitates the transfer of what is learned in school to real-life situations. "Storytelling - an ancient yet contemporary art form, can serve as an important medium for effective communication of curriculum content, with long lasting repercussions for children as learners and participants in a complex and demanding world" (Jaffe, 2000, p. 175). Storying allows for the 'other,' or those voices that have been erased to be included in the dominant discourse (Meyer, 1996, p.140).

Recent trends toward a global standardization in curriculum, suggest that contemporary society is moving toward a global dominance. This results from participation in the mass culture of the world wide web, satellite media, or franchised markets. It is not unusual to find that students are more comfortable with cultural membership in the "kids networks" than in the local community. As they gain experience with schooling, they don't share "words from home" as they become aware of nuances of language that will set them apart as different. Rather than using their parents' standard, they apply the new cultural group's expectations about lifestyles and quality of living. As students "dialogue in a new software" they often become reluctant to speak their home language in public spaces (Wason-Ellam & Li, 1999). They want to speak language that will let them be "cool" or, at the very least, language that does not draw attention to themselves. All too often they resist home language by making playful the dialogical nature of media language which has a certain rhythm, coding, or language play such as rap or superhero talk. Schools need to reconceptualize its very nature locally to affirm the uniqueness of the individual and recognizes the interrelationship of all experiences. This can be accomplished through conversational storytelling where students learn about themselves and the world around them within the context of culture. Often, First Nations and Métis students may feel pressured to renounce their cultural beliefs, language, and norms in order to assimilate into the majority culture. Nonetheless, distance from a home culture can interfere with their emotional and cognitive development and frequently result in school failure. The curriculum should be integrated, interdisciplinary, meaningful, and student-centered. It should include issues and topics

related to the students' background and culture. Of critical importance, the curriculum should challenge the students to develop higher-order knowledge and critical thinking skills rather than allow students to be a passive recipient of someone else's words.

Henderson (2000) urges teachers to understand the restrictive nature of the Eurocentric curriculum and its impact on Indigenous children and use this knowledge to incorporate Aboriginal teachings and traditions into dominant educational contexts. It is suggested that successfully educating Indigenous students depend on offering culturally appropriate curriculum and pedagogy. Indigenous scholars unanimously agree that "student achievement and performance in school and pride in Aboriginal communities and heritages are directly tied to respect for and support of the students' Aboriginal languages" (Battiste, 2000, p. 199) and histories.

Just knowing that there are students from particular First Nations or Métis ancestries in the classroom does not tell teachers much about specific cultural backgrounds of those students or their families. Instead, the teachers in this study assumed that their task was to know not only about the students' culture in general, but also to know about these students in particular. When interweaving the students' culture into classroom storytelling or Talking Circles they learned much about what they needed to know to teach particular students in personally distinctive and meaningful ways. Accordingly, by including both private spaces such as storytelling and public spaces as in class discussions, the teaching became more sensitive and powerfully engaging. Teaching about culture as socially constructed rather than essentialist was pedagogically consistent with recent cultural theory (Banks & Banks, 2001).

Student-centered instruction differs from the traditional teacher-centered instruction. Learning is social, cooperative, collaborative, and community-oriented. Students are encouraged to direct their own learning and to work with other students on other oral assignments, and research projects that are both culturally and socially relevant to them. In the course of becoming an academic achiever, students become self-confident, self-directed, and proactive. By being

allowed to learn in different ways or to share viewpoints and perspectives in a given situation based on their own cultural and social experiences, students become active participants in their learning (Nieto, 1996). Hollins (1996) believes that culturally mediated instruction provides the best learning conditions for all students. It may help decrease the number of incidences of unacceptable behavior or drop-outs from students who are frustrated with instruction not meeting their needs.

In a global world students references are often created by the media. TV programs, either by design or default exploit a child's orientating response. Programs continually refocus the viewer to new content. The viewer must mentally integrate diverse camera shots of a scene to construct an image of the whole. However, throughout the research study, the findings suggest that First Nations and Métis teachers had a myriad of examples of how stories would pop up as a culturally responsive teaching approach connecting the home culture with the ways of school. Our participants entailed a willingness to explore their own knowledge and praxis as necessarily contingent upon the history and structure of their own communities (rather than as immutable "truth" or "best practices"). Queedum recounted how stories are central in her classroom, "*I use stories a lot, but not from books, ...from life experiences*" (p.1). Eileen relates, "*I use ...stories because those stories are a lot of teaching. There is a lesson to be learned. The moral of the story is...And it's surprising how they get that* (p. 4). While Patricia reflected on her practice by elaborating, "*I think one of the big reasons that I like to have storytelling as a part of the classroom is the validation of importance, and knowing what they live, what they experience, who they are, is important. And having a chance to tell us, and have us appreciate that*" (p.18) is critical to identity.

Queedum expresses her understandings:

*Storytelling opens....doors because they see me as (sic the teacher), but they also see me as someone different. They see me as a single parent, they see me as a grandmother that's raising her granddaughter, they see me as somebody that was very, very poor, and I came from a single parent family... They see me as a whole* (p.8).

In the past, for First Nations and Métis peoples culture was “ what the elders told us,” while at present, younger students are able to accept the increasing list of Aboriginal writing, especially in children’s literature and young adult novels, as evidence of Aboriginal culture. “Nevertheless, their cultural roots are still in the experiences and traditions of orally-held knowledge and as such their thinking is characterized by . . .the orality of culture that has not been deeply influenced by the patterns of literate thought. (Dunn, 2001,p. xv). Education and training programs that offer pan-Aboriginal curriculum content or essentializing about Aboriginal peoples in an effort to be culturally sensitive are flawed because they fail to appreciate the heterogeneity of over 605 different First Nations in Canada, each with their own particular history, language dialect, culture, and social organization (Ball, 2004, p. 5).

According to Simone storytelling was validating an First Nations self, *“I had a very multi-cultural classroom and some of them were kind of embarrassed about their culture and it gave them an opportunity, I think to share, well this is what our family does. I think stuff like that really helps with developing their self-confidence”* (p.3). In relational learning, story becomes a dialogue between the storyteller and listeners. The listeners are actively involved in the story. The listeners are predicting, questioning, relating and imagining. “...storytelling becomes a vehicle for discovering who we are, for making sense of our world, for enhancing our learning/teaching, and for plain old fun” (Collins & Cooper, 1997, p.1). They are learning by relating the known to the unknown as they actively try to make sense of the story in terms of their previous knowledge and experience. The storyteller is not just using talk. “Dialogue, on the other hand, is entered into because it presupposes a ‘tacit sense of relevance’” (Bernstein, 1983, p.2). “A precondition for dialogue interaction, therefore, is that all participants see the discourse as important and have a say in determining its course” (Gitlin, 1990, p.447). Personal storytelling creates an environment for students to hear their ideas and explore the ideas shared by the other members of the classroom community. It allows students to explore their own interpretations of the narrative. Stella related how talking circles creates a critical dynamic in the classroom where stories emerge:

*I did talking circles with them a few times, and that is one of your safest elements to get them talking, because you sit in a circle and everyone would have a turn to speak. But I find that when I move into a school where circle is not used, that it takes awhile for them to trust that's how it's going to be (p.4).*

The Talking Circle traces its roots to a traditional way of bringing First Nations and Métis peoples together for listening, teaching, sharing and learning. The talking circle is a circle of respect, a sacred hoop. Everything Indian people do is in a circle, because the power of the world works in circles and cycles such as the circles of life, the seasons, relatives, drum, or dancing. Telling personal stories in a Talking Circle are compatible with culturally responsive teaching, as it is a pedagogy that empowers students intellectually, socially, emotionally, and politically by capitalizing on their own cultural referents to impart knowledge, skills or attitudes (Ladson-Billings, 1994). As Wason-Ellam (1993, 1992) points out, storytelling is an exchange of cultural ideas. On first impression, personal storytelling may seem like idle tales, for they are told in the course of everyday happenings. But, Alasdair MacIntyre, a moral philosopher, states (1981) “we all live out narratives in our lives.... and we understand our own lives in terms of the narratives we live out.... He believes that the form of narratives is appropriate for understanding the actions of others. Stories are lived before they are told-(p.197).” In the same way, Morgan (1989) values personal stories as the naturally occurring informal and interpersonal exchange of ideas and information for storytelling flourishes in the day-to-day moments of our daily life. As storytellers, we relate experiences, give explanations, and talk about the things we do. Whenever we want to say something, anything, we format it in a story to clearly articulate our thoughts, emotions and impressions. This view of conversational storytelling rests on the assumption about talk that is a pervasive and culturally organized feature of social life in every culture (Miller & Mehler, 1994). Storytelling is not a “stage performance” but encompasses our experiences and daily life. Barbara Hardy (cited in Rosen, 1986) describes story as a “primary act of mind transferred from art to life.” In this way, we as humans can conceptualize ourselves as a storytelling tribe. As story sharers, we release the language and emotions dwelling within our consciousness:

...we dream in narrative, remember, anticipate, hope, despair, believe, doubt, plan, revise, criticise, gossip, learn, hate and love by narrative. In order to really live, we make up stories about ourselves and others, about the personal as well as the social past and future (p 13).

According to Polkinghorne (1988), the story resembles an explanatory narrative which organizes events into a unified story where the links between the events are articulated and the significance is provided, either implicitly or explicitly. Explanatory narrative differs from descriptive stories as it is reflective and conscious. In storytelling, the teller seeks to make sense of the complexity of events that contribute to explaining the outcome. Storying not only belongs to a particular mode of discourse; it is as Bruner (1986) states “also a way of thinking.” Teachers as storytellers not only create new stories but also amend traditional ones that are passed down through the generations, sometimes choosing their own details while retaining the story’s fundamental characters, plot and moral. In addition to lending a framework for the storyteller to work within, oral tradition encourages individuality and spontaneity. Each storyteller adjusts the story to fit his or her audience and enjoyment stems from the individualistic, performative, aspects of storytelling and often the listener delights more in the telling itself (Howard, 1999). While the students are listening to the story being shared they are making connections to their lived experience, they maybe already imagining the story they will share. Wells (1986) claims that constructing stories is primary way of making meaning. Storytelling offers opportunities for teachers to assess student learning. When a student is ready to share his or her story, it demonstrates that they have made a reflective connection to their lived experiences. “These connections allow everyone the gift of stretching academically and emotionally to understand the lives of others beyond their own individual experiences” (Cardwell, 2002, p.85).

## **Storytelling professionalizes teaching practices**

In global times, the "de-professionalizing " of teachers has been an accelerated



trajectory. Even as educators claim that scripted lessons cannot be mass-produced and delivered as fast fixed solutions, pedagogical philosophies that fit the model of efficiency have increased their unyielding hold on educational practices. The accountability and standardization movement has led many administrators and teachers to focus narrowly on test preparation rather than focus on robust teaching and learning. This means that the standardization of assessment leads naturally to the standardization of teaching. Although publishing companies are eager to promote scripted or autonomous programs that proclaim efficiency, expediency, and results--and thus ensure corporate profits. Curriculum scripted by text books or even test writers are not the keys to providing students with optimum learning experiences. The effect upon learning is that of de-professionalizing teachers who become simple deliverers of content and skill processes rather than those who intricately synthesize content, skills, and concepts to create sophisticated curriculum designed to meet the individual needs of their particular students.

When a mainstream, standardized, one-size-fits-all curriculum is all that is offered, too often the result is a homogenizing, monocultural, colonizing approach to learning that is inappropriate for the varied social ecologies of Indigenous students. In reflecting upon her teaching strategies, Simone talks about storytelling in this way:

*I do use it (Storytelling) a lot. It's not that you have to think about it, it's because that's who I am as a person. Is it that cultural connection? I would say that it probably is, and maybe that's where it comes from, so that's why it doesn't have to be planned. It's just part of who you are, not only a teacher, but as a Métis teacher or an First Nations teacher (p.9).*

Simone takes the lead from her students as she explains that often the curriculum does not match the realities of her students.

*...it's so far removed from their reality, that by bringing stories into it, it brings a real element that they can understand and relate to. It's not just way out here, and what does that have to do with me, but it's a matter of you know what, yes, it does have to do with you, and this is how*

*it has to do with you given the story* (p.8).

Teaching cannot be standardized. Often Simone finds she uses a story to clarify a point that students may not grasp. When reflecting on this practice, she says, *“It is usually impromptu just because the discussion has led to somewhere, or it’s used to motivate, but it wasn’t something I originally planned on, but it’s working better than what I had originally planned, so that kind of flexibility is needed”* ( p.5). Queedum remarks that stories fit into so many areas of what she wants to teach. *“We are learning about pioneers right now, so I use a lot of my Mother’s stories. They used to live in log houses”* (p.1). Indeed, stories fit into instruction. While teachers’ manuals and supplemental materials from textbook companies may comprise a portion of how teachers think about what they teach, what is needed is to put teacher professional knowledge and content knowledge at the forefront of instructional planning. Teachers need to think beyond the textbook-generated questions and marginal notes in order to consider their own students. What will interest them? How can they relate the content to their lives? In what ways can I give students voice? are critical questions teachers need to ask. Storytelling gives voice to learners in providing a place for sharing something of themselves. *“The potential for storytelling to empower and engage culturally diverse students while providing, in turn, a context for a strong sense of critical thinking for all,...students and teachers alike, such that the nature of our shared reality, and our relationship to it, is made more visible and less intimidating”* (Sarris, 2000, p.72). Students who have voice are able to view themselves as producers of knowledge and not merely as recipients. For Giroux, (1992), *“It means restructuring the curriculum so as to redefine the everyday as an important resource for linking schools to the traditions, communities, and histories that provide students with a sense of voice and relationship to others”* (p.176). For teachers in the study, it meant constructing learning environments in the classroom context that are modeled on the natural occurring learning environments in the community. Frequently, Queedum shares the stories of her family traditions within the daily rhythms of her teaching. *“I make it a teachable moment. “When I’m planning I don’t say, this is the story I’m going to use. It just comes. It’ll just flow. I’ll have a memory, I’ll recall something, and I’ll say, I’ve got to share this with you. This is an experience I had”* (p.3). These teaching stories help students to see implicit life lessons such as commitment to steadfast work and unwavering determination. For most students,

true engagement requires an optimal learning environment that is relevant and personally meaningful while affirming the student's own identity and experiences. Typically, optimal learning requires classroom processes that empower students, giving them a sense of self-direction and self-efficacy. Queedum believes, “*Because I’m not teaching comprehension... I’m not teaching recall. I’m teaching from what’s in here (pointing to her heart) and they’ll remember those stories as they get older*” (p.10).

In Conclusion, storytelling as a teaching strategy sheds light on the social organizations of the First Nations and Métis teachers. They found storytelling as a way to subvert narrowly conceived methodologies, challenge reductive assumptions about teaching and learning, and take back their right to teach their subject matter effectively. In teaching practice, stories are analogies that become advice to others and, very often to ourselves. Retelling that moment may reveal new layers of meaning as students grow and learn more about the world from their experiences. In the same way, “the oral tradition can provide teachers with invaluable resources for deepening and extending their curriculum studies in form and content” (Jaffe, 2000, p. 171). For First Nations and Métis teachers, storytelling allows them to take learning beyond and bring meaning to experiences. Stella states the key importance of storying in her lessons, “*It’s more real for them. I think everybody likes things that they can connect to real life rather than me giving notes*” (p.7). Queedum says that she has a lot of kids that really struggle academically and she relates stories about her trials as a young student:

*When I share my stories about that, they just all cry, but... you’re a teacher, but you failed. I said, I failed grade two. I point out how I came through the system. I had a learning disability. I say how I overcame all of that, and they just, oh. That would just open something else new. I said, you can do it. You can do anything you want as long as you work towards it. Then I explained to them, I didn’t have the support at home. My Mom is illiterate, she can’t read or write. Everything that I had to do, I had to do on my own. I didn’t have a parent that could support me because she couldn’t. It’s not that she didn’t want to, she couldn’t (p.4-5)*

Jaffe (2000) argues, “When teachers begin to explore their own personal narratives within

a structural, value-laden...context, their associations take on more purposeful dimensions as they seek to find connections between family stories and their students' learning and divergent interests and needs" (p.166). Queedum, like other teachers in the study, can cross over into the lives of their students through the use of story. The teacher intersects their lived experience by sharing their own personal narratives from their memories of being a student. Cardwell (2002) suggests, "Teachers who share their personal narrative in the classroom offer students a window into their life experiences and the meanings they have made of it" (p.77). More importantly he contends, "Weaving together personal narratives and academic work helps create a broader context of the children's and teachers' collective experience into which the academic lessons fit" (p.77).

Jaffe (2000) reminds teachers, "Storytelling can become a key component for teachers as a focus of integration for many curriculum areas - for it is the teacher who knows best when to tell a story, and how it can best be worked into his or her ongoing themes" (p.171). As a teaching practice, storytelling allows First Nations and Métis teachers to make connections from experiences and traditional knowledge to specific curricular material, whether it is literature, math, social studies, religion, or science. Good teaching is a highly complex intellectual activity. It requires of the teacher keen insight into the changing communities in which students live, understanding of the multiple ways of thinking about curriculum problems, having a strong grasp of developmentally responsive strategies, negotiating the myriad of perspectives associated with the relationship between content and context, "all with a command of pedagogical content knowledge aimed at connecting students with the world of ideas in and across subject matter disciplines." (Nelson, 2003, p. 4-5).

When reflecting on the analysis of our research with seven First Nations and Métis teachers, we are reminded of the words of Parker Palmer who poetically evokes the heart of what teachers do:

Each time I walk into the classroom, I can choose the place within myself from which my teaching will come, just as I can choose the place within my students toward which my teaching will be aimed (1998, p. 57)

What matters in teaching is that what the teachers in this study already know. We as teachers must continually examine better ways to do schooling than scripting the curriculum and de-professionalizing our praxis. Teaching is about helping students achieve pathways to achievement by maximizing their potential and reaching out to them with caring so that they will know that they are acknowledged, affirmed and hold a unique purpose in the world.

## **Lessons Learned**

In our analysis, there are several key lessons learned in this study that are critical to storytelling as culturally responsive pedagogy. And we make some recommendations to work for social and educational change.

Primarily, as a meaning-making process, storytelling can be conceptualized as *an instructional strategy*. Mentally constructing stories is one of the most fundamental ways for making meaning; as such, it is a process that pervades all aspects of learning. When storying is given expression in words, the resulting stories makes available to others the storyteller's own cultural interpretations of events and ideas. Therefore through the exchange of stories, teachers and students can contribute to their understandings of a topic and bring their mental models of the world into closer alignment. In this sense, storying is a responsive instructional strategy in all areas of the curriculum, not a best practice which implies universality. Best practice means accumulating and applying knowledge about what is working and not working in different situations and contexts. In other words, it is both the lessons learned and the continuing process of learning, feedback, reflection and analysis (what works, how and why?). However, the present day educational jargon promotes the ideal of "best practice," as if there might be instructional models that can be transported to varying contexts with the expectation of "best" outcomes regardless of the state of readiness, resources, values, or needs of learners in each new setting. We cannot essentialize about First Nations or Métis students, or for any student. To act as if

differences of race, ethnicity, or native language does not matter to schooling is disingenuous. In this study, First Nations and Métis teachers follow Indigenous teaching traditions by “leading with the local knowledge.” It was important for the students first to know about the topics from an Indigenous viewpoint, and secondly, then learn about Western perspectives or what might be called a Two Worlds Curriculum.

**Recommendation #1:** It is recommended that teacher professionals become aware and appreciative of the many promising educational practices that reflect the diversity of human experience, individual and collective goals, and social ecologies rather than searching for the illusory “best practices” with universal applicability.

Secondly, in listening to the words of our participants and through our own personal experience we learned about the all important role that storytelling plays in empowering teacher and students to synthesize and verbalize personal experiences, make known their feelings, and construct meaning processes critical to effective learning as well as personal growth. Students were helped to see major concepts, big ideas, and general principles rather than isolated or irrelevant facts. In the conversational storytelling spaces, the teachers served as *institutional agents*, that is, individuals who helped their students negotiate resources and opportunities including information about culture, heritage and conducting their daily living. These social networks were pathways to power and social capital (Bourdieu, 1986), a resource entangled with economic and political privilege which was not always available in the students’ own urban or reserve community. Teachers in this study reconceptualized their role as one who interrupts the status quo by actively serving as agents of support for their students. They showed their commitment to the students through cultural sensitivity, high expectations, and exploration of pedagogical proficiency that was tailored to the specific needs of students in urban schools. Teachers need to rethink their role as a broker between Indigenous and Non-Indigenous cultures. There should be possibilities for students to have the best of both worlds—admission to the mainstream culture of school but also recognition for their own cultural values, traditions, ways of learning, and interests.

**Recommendation #2:** In place of transmissional or didactic teaching style for working with First Nations and Métis students, teachers need to explore flexible, self-directed, and transactional ways to connect to students own roots or socio-cultural contexts. In this role, teachers act as guides, mediators, consultants, and advocates for the students, helping to effectively connect their culturally-based and community-based knowledge to the classroom learning experiences.

Third, in the traditional Aboriginal perspective, learning is never finished; it is a treasured part of everyday living and a lifelong process. In keeping with this perspective, the teachers saw “themselves” as learners, too, who were open to considering differences between their own First Nations or Métis cultures and the cultures of the communities they serve, and to be willing to change their ways of teaching to give students a better chance in school. The world of school is still a place of daunting hurdles for students who are different in some way from the majority of students. It is fortunate that teachers are beginning to assume leadership to wrestle with these issues. Growth in teaching is usually a matter of reflecting, borrowing, reshaping, and inventing practices to suit students’ needs and their unique cultural contexts.

**Recommendation #3:** In place of a program based approach to instructing First Nations and Métis students, teachers need to have a readiness to meet classrooms learning in imaginative and ingenious ways. Rather than conceptualizing teachers as technicians, teachers are professionals who need the “wobble room” to design instruction that builds on what students already know while stretching them beyond the familiar.

## **Final Thoughts**

This study illustrates the personal and collective transformation of seven First Nations and Métis teachers. It also reinforces the belief that individual teachers can make a difference in the lives of their students. All of the teachers made a commitment to be students of their students or learned about their students which is a switch from the one-way learning that usually occurs in the classroom. They also made spaces in which they as teachers could learn along side their students and in which students could learn about themselves and others. For the teachers, they used storytelling to build on what their students bring with them to the classroom. More importantly, by being allowed to learn in different ways or to share viewpoints and perspectives in a given situation based on their own cultural and social experiences, the students become active participants on their pathway to learning and to creating an academic identity.



## **Researchers' Biographies:**

**Melanie MacLean:** As a classroom teacher in Saskatoon's Catholic School Division (1997 to present), Melanie MacLean has identified herself as an advocate of Aboriginal Education in the school community. Since her convocation with distinction from SUNTEP Saskatoon, her Métis heritage has allowed her to integrate Ladson-Billings (1994) culturally relevant teaching into her classroom practice. Melanie has worked as an Aboriginal Education representative at the various school sites she has been employed throughout the division. She has also participated as committee member on the Métis Catholic History Project (2002), as well as the Métis History Showcase Committee within the Saskatoon Catholic School Division. Melanie has also volunteered her time to the greater Métis community in assisting with the Métis Identity Conference (2003). Her Masters work focused on Métis Education and the recent completion of her Masters Thesis entitled "Métis Teachers: Identity, Culture and the Classroom" revealed the use of story as a teaching methodology by its participants. This has generated a further desire to research the use of story by other Métis teachers.

**Linda Wason-Ellam:** As a former classroom teacher in urban cross-cultural schools (1964-1977) Linda is a professor at the University of Saskatchewan and an ongoing researcher in inner-city community schools (1980-to present). She has been using ethnographic research methodologies to expand her understanding of social and relational practices in cross-cultural classrooms that affirm and value the experiences of each and every child. As a white woman of privilege, she positions herself in Haig-Brown's (1990) category of border-work, choosing to stay and work in society's margins in a supportive and bridging role. Her doctoral work (1977-1981) was mentored by Dr. Sally Old Coyote who addressed reading and community literacy practices with American Indian groups. As a university researcher in urban schools both locally and internationally (Alberta, Saskatchewan, USA, N. Ireland, England, Qatar), she has spent extended time in classrooms systematically documenting, observing, and participating in literacy engagements with

emerging readers and writers using participatory research. One of her major contributions to research has been to problematize for educators the difficulties that children within the social fabric of the Canadian mosaic, including readers and writers from Aboriginal and immigrant families encounter in learning to be read and write in Saskatchewan classrooms. The findings of her research suggest that teachers see that the students of the social fabric are not failing school rather the structures of classrooms, the teaching methodologies, and the demands on testing often fail students of diversity. In the quest for becoming schooled, the norms of the mainstream put enormous pressure in shaping how educators view and instruct students of diversity and how students view themselves. Failure to learn does not develop out of thin air; it is scrupulously created through policies, practices, attitudes, and beliefs that may not be culturally congruent. At present, Wason-Ellam teaches classes in reading, literacy education, qualitative research methods and works with the Prince Albert Grand Council on facilitating the Revitalizing Reading Professional Development Teacher Workshops in the Northern Saskatchewan band schools. She is Vice Chair of the Behavioral Research Ethics Board, the University of Saskatchewan and has been Chair of the Storytelling Committee, National Council of Teachers of English.

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**APPENDIXES A-D**

**University of Saskatchewan Behavioural Research Ethics**

**UNIVERSITY OF SASKATCHEWAN BEHAVIORAL ETHICS RESEARCH BOARD**

**Application for Approval of Research Protocol**

File Number #BSC 2005

Date Received

**RESEARCHER'S SUMMARY**

**RESEARCHERS**

Linda Wason-Ellam, Professor, Department: Curriculum Studies

Melanie MacLean, Teacher, Saskatoon Catholic School Board

**1. a/b ANTICIPATED START DATE:** April 25, 2005

**COMPLETION DATE:** June 2006

**2. TITLE OF THE STUDY:** When Aboriginal and Métis Teachers use Storytelling as an Instructional Practice

**3. ABSTRACT:**

Aboriginal and Métis teachers bring to their professional practice funds of knowledge and culturally patterned ways of organizing and transferring knowledge as well as the values of their communities. There is a growing need for these teachers to weave more culturally responsive methodologies into their classroom pedagogy to ensure the success of Aboriginal and Métis students. Storytelling is a cultural patterned tool for it provides examples of a social context in which students can see real-life relationships between themselves and others being acted out and resolved in the everyday world. As an oral tradition it can provide classroom teachers with a cultural way of exploring concepts and extending students learning. Storytelling is an exchange of cultural ideas (Wason-Ellam, 1993, 1992),



a pedagogy that empowers students intellectually, socially, emotionally, and politically by using their own cultural referents to impart knowledge, skills or attitudes (Ladson-Billings, 1994). For Aboriginal and Métis teachers, storytelling allows them to take learning beyond texts and bring meaning to students within the frame of their own culture and experiences. "Storytelling can become a key component for teachers as a focus of integration for many curriculum areas - for it is the teacher who knows best when to tell a story, and how it can best be worked into his or her ongoing themes" (Jaffe, 2000, p. 17 1).

In the proposed research, a cross-cultural research team will investigate the use of storytelling by Aboriginal and Métis teachers as a culturally relevant teaching approach that connects the home culture with the ways of school. As a teaching practice, storytelling allows Aboriginal and Métis teachers to make connections from traditional knowledge to curricular materials.

#### **4. FUNDING: Aboriginal Education Research Network, Saskatchewan Learning.**

**5. PARTICIPANTS:** In this naturalistic inquiry (*studying people in their own environments*), the researchers will use purposive sampling to select ten (10) classroom teachers of Aboriginal or Métis ancestry, from two Saskatoon school divisions, who use storytelling in their professional practice. Mac Lean is a Métis teacher in the Saskatoon Catholic Board and is an active member of Aboriginal and Métis teacher committees locally and provincially. Her recent Masters Thesis (2005) "Métis Teachers: Identity, Culture and the Classroom" revealed the use of story as a teaching methodology by its participants. This has generated a further desire to research the use of story by other Métis and Aboriginal teachers. Wason-Ellam has conducted many research studies within the Saskatoon Public Schools over the past 19 years addressing research on storying as she worked with Aboriginal and Métis teachers and children. In addition, she works with the Prince Albert Grand Council on a project addressing culturally responsive reading, storying, and writing methodologies for teachers in reserve schools.

The researchers will approach the Saskatoon Public School Board and the Saskatoon Catholic Board for approval of the study. With recommendations from the School Boards they will approach

Aboriginal and Métis teachers to determine the feasibility of recruiting volunteer teachers for membership in the study in their out of school time. MacLean and Wason-Ellam are members of many teacher/curriculum networks and has collegial relationship with most of the Aboriginal and Métis teachers who teach in these school divisions.

#### **5a. The Recruiting Letter to the School Division (Appendix B).**

**6. INFORMED CONSENT:** The researchers will meet with the participant teachers and principals individually to inform them about the research study and explain consent in detail. In addition, it will be explained to participants that they are free to withdraw at any time without a penalty and if so, all their data sources from interviews and observations will be destroyed. Informed consent will be obtained from each participant teacher in the school who will be read the consent form and be given opportunity for questions. The participants will sign the consent form to indicate their agreement to participate before the study proceeds. (See Informed Consent Appendix C-Principals/Teachers).

#### **7. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY:**

In this naturalistic inquiry, the researchers will exploring storytelling practices in natural settings, what and how it means. The study will be guided by the following overarching research question: *How do Aboriginal and/or Métis teachers use storytelling to create a more culturally relevant and empowering learning environment?* Specific objectives to guide the data collection are: (1) to document and analyze the ways Aboriginal and Métis teachers match the pedagogical styles of teaching that are more congruent with student's cultural values and ways of knowing;(2) to explore how these teachers view storytelling as a two-way communication process. In this way, the teachers will be invited to examine their own positions about issues of professional practice including issues of institutional power and privilege which may be unacknowledged but needed as they become the learners of and teachers of students; (3) to transfer knowledge about the findings to community, scholarly and professional audiences with an intention to make recommendations about the role of storytelling as a culturally relevant strategy to policy makers, curriculum writers, and school administrators both local and provincial.

The researchers intend to use in-depth conversational interviews (Mishler, 1989) or semistructured interviews with the teachers that use open-ended questions as a probe in order to gather a wide range of perspectives (*in depth interviewing is designed to elicit a rich understanding of the participant's way of thinking. These interviews are less structured than a typical interview and involve the researcher probing into topics that the participant may bring up*). The interviews will be audiotaped and transcribed. Upon invitation by the teachers, the researcher will conduct some observations of in-class storytelling activities using field notes (*a written account of what the researcher hears, sees, experiences, and thinks in data gathering observations about resources and teaching methodologies*).

The focus will be on the activities as examples of best practices and not directed to specific student-learner or teacher observations. The researchers will be spending one to two mornings per week in the school with the Aboriginal and Métis teachers who are teaching students along side other classmates from the Canadian mosaic. Observations examine the ways storytelling is used as a teaching strategy which means that the researchers will not be observing the teacher or the students.

**Analysis** will be ongoing as the research team sifts through the data looking for patterns and connections using a constant comparative methodology. Through analytic induction, they will be able to infer that events or statements were instances of the same underlying theme all the while keeping the research question in focus. As researchers, they will ask themselves, "*Is this code similar to or different from other codes?*" A similar technique is used in looking for patterns between the codes and categories. They will use Atlas-ti, an open-ended computer program to initially code and organize the transcript data to later organize into patterns or themes.

**Interpretation:** More intensive than the summary of the patterns will be rendering the interpretation of the study which requires the research team to think in new and dialogical ways. Interpretation involves redesigning old categories, formulating new relationships by combining elements in novel ways, projecting beyond what actually exists, conjuring up probable connections and metaphors and wondering, "why not," and "what if." The research will focus on the ways Aboriginal and Métis teachers match storytelling as a pedagogical styles with student's cultural values. In this project, the engagement in the field and the involvement of two researchers, will provide triangulated data for trustworthy and authentic interpretation. It is critical that the team interprets the research by integrating the findings with those of related and relevant studies, to establish how the findings relate to broader theoretical frameworks, to explicate what the study means outside of the one context, and to make recommendations and transfer of knowledge to the community, local schools and policy makers.

**8. DATA STORAGE:** Upon the completion of the study, all data (field notes, transcripts, tapes, documents, and artifacts) will be securely stored and retained by the researcher for a minimum of five

years with Dr. Linda Wason-Ellam, Department of Curriculum Studies, College of Education in accordance with the University of Saskatchewan guidelines before being destroyed.

**9. DISSEMINATION OF RESULTS:** Participants will be informed that their contributions (which they agree to share in the Data/Transcript Release Form, Appendix D) may be written in a scholarly journal article or in conference presentations. The dissemination of results will be decided collaboratively among researchers and community participants, and may include the following: community meetings, newsletters, board meetings, and workshop or conference presentations. This research model for partnerships should serve as a conduit for the transfer of theoretical and technical expertise from university to the community, and the concomitant transfer of equally valued practice-based knowledge and skills from the community back to the university.

In keeping with the collaborative nature of this research, the participants will have the opportunity to read their contributions to the draft of the study and make comments. At the end of the study, participants will be given the opportunity to have a copy of the manuscript and any and all publications.

**10. RISKS:** There is no risk or deception in the study. Participants will be made aware of the purpose of the study and why they are participants. It is not anticipated that any of the questions will become uncomfortable.

**11. CONFIDENTIALITY** The study will take place in two schools and therefore there will be limits to anonymity. Participants will be made aware of those limits. All participants will be assured that third party privacy (confidentiality) will be maintained throughout the gathering of information and the writing of the study. Pseudonyms will be used to identify participants and any identifying personal information about them or their attributes will not be used in publications and presentations. Because the teachers work within a school, everyone will know that the study is occurring and may observe who is participating with the researchers. Participants will be made aware what participation means.

**12. DATA TRANSCRIPT RELEASE (See Appendix D)**

Since the interview records opinions, feelings, recollections, and descriptions the participants will have the opportunity to read the transcripts to clarify, add or delete information so it will accurately represent them and their intellectual property. In keeping with respectful research, they will be told orally what the researcher would like to share about what they said and later they can read/edit what is written in the draft of the report or journal article.

**13. DEBRIEFING and FEEDBACK:** Since this study is collaborative, the participants will be involved throughout the study as they review their transcripts and their contribution to the draft of the study to feel reassured that the researcher is interpreting and representing their intellectual property, that is their thoughts, feelings, and knowledge about their professional practice.

**14. REQUIRED SIGNATURES:**

The Research Proposal has been reviewed by:

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Dr. Jessica Latshaw, Department Head Department of Curriculum Studies	Date
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Dr. Linda Wason-Ellam, Professor Department of Curriculum Studies	Date
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Melanie MacLean, Métis Teacher Saskatoon Catholic Board	Date

## **APPENDIX A: SAMPLE QUESTIONS**

### **Use of story as a teaching methodology by Aboriginal or Métis teachers**

#### **Interview Questions**

1. Can you describe the types of stories do you tell?
2. What are some features of the stories you tell?
3. If stories are topic-centred, can you describe how you use these types of stories?
4. What structures do you follow in your use of story?
5. Can you describe what you view as the purpose of storytelling in the classroom?
6. Are there some stories you like to retell?
7. How do you use stories to offer different perspectives or points of view?
8. Do you plan for other activities around your use of story?
9. Do you share stories that are not from your personal experiences? If so, when and why?
10. How do students respond to the use of story in the classroom?
11. Do you ask students questions about the personal narratives you tell?

12. In what ways do you include student voice in the classroom?
13. How do you evaluate students when you use story as a teaching methodology?
14. What kinds of knowledge do you want your students to get from your use of story?
15. What impact do you feel your use of story has on your students? Classroom environment?

## **APPENDIX B: LETTER OF REQUEST TO THE SCHOOL DIVISION**

Dear Director :

We appreciate the Saskatoon Public School Division's interest in the recently funded research study: When Aboriginal and Métis Teachers use Storytelling as an Instructional Practice, funded project by the Aboriginal Education Research Network, Saskatchewan Learning. This is a timely topic as the researchers will explicate how storytelling, as a culturally responsive pedagogy, plays a role in communicating and receiving information, but also in shaping the thinking process of individuals. Culturally responsive teaching recognizes the importance of including students' cultural references in all aspects of learning. A pedagogy that acknowledges, responds to, and celebrates fundamental cultures offers full, equitable access to education for students from all cultures.

The study will be guided by the following overarching research question: *How do Aboriginal or Métis teachers use storytelling to create a more culturally relevant and empowering learning environment?* We intend to interview ten Aboriginal and Métis teachers using semi-structured/conversational interviews as well take part in invited informal classroom observations of best storytelling practices.

We look forward to meeting with you and discussing this application.



Yours sincerely,

Melanie MacLean, Teacher

Dr. Linda Wason-Ellam, Professor

Encl.: A copy of the research ethics proposal, the consent form for the teachers, the letter of approval from the University of Saskatchewan Behavioral Ethics Research Board and the overarching questions that will frame the study.

## APPENDIX C: INFORMED CONSENT FOR TEACHERS

We appreciate your participation in the research study "*When Aboriginal and Métis Teachers use Storytelling as an Instructional Practice.*" The study will illuminate how storytelling can be a culturally responsive pedagogy that recognizes the importance of including students' cultural references in all aspects of learning. We will adhere to the following guidelines which are designed to protect the interests of everyone taking part in the study.

1. We will interview you to understand how you use storying as a traditional teaching practice. At your invitation, we would like to observe one of your classes to understand some of your storytelling practices as you use story as an analogy when teaching concepts and values. We will not observe you or the children. Our intention is to gain a sense of how classrooms can be structured to integrate storytelling as a culturally relevant teaching practice.

2. You will be interviewed once (45 minutes per interview) The interview will be audiotaped. You may turn off the tape recorder at any time during the interview. Participation in the study is voluntary, and you may withdraw at any time without a penalty. If this happens, the tape recordings and interview data will be destroyed.

3. After your interview, the audiotape will be transcribed as a smoothed narrative version of the transcripts with false starts, repetitions, and "ok" and other utterances removed to make it more readable. The transcript will be analyzed to discover the major themes which were discussed. You will be able to check the transcriptions to clarify and add information in your own words so as to construct the meanings that become "data" for later interpretation by the researcher. You will be asked to sign a data release form. In discussing the data with the researcher, you may delete anything you do not wish to be quoted in the study. You will be able to see a copy of your contributions to the study before the final draft and you will receive a copy of the study.

4. The tape recordings made during the study will be kept in a secure place and will be held with the Dr. Linda Wason-Ellam at the University of Saskatchewan for five years according to the University of Saskatchewan guidelines.

6. Since this is a study in your school, there are limits to anonymity. However, your contributions will remain confidential. The results of the study will be disseminated at scholarly conferences and in journal articles to assure confidentiality. Pseudonyms will be used for your name and identifying information will be eliminated.

The proposed research project was reviewed and approved on ethical grounds by the University of Saskatchewan Advisory Committee on Ethics in Behavioural Science Research on \_\_\_\_\_2005. If at any time you have any questions about this study or your rights as a participant, you can contact us, Melanie MacLean, Saskatoon Catholic Schools at 306-343-9731 or Dr. Linda Wason-Ellam, Department of Curriculum Studies, telephone: 966-7578 (home 653-5844); or e-mail: [wasonell@duke.usask.ca](mailto:wasonell@duke.usask.ca) or the Office of Research Services, University of Saskatchewan at 306-966-2084 by calling collect or e-mail to: Curtis [Chapman@usask.ca](mailto:Chapman@usask.ca)

I, \_\_\_\_\_, agree to participate in the above study as explained to me. I understand the guidelines outlined above. I have received a copy of the consent form for my records.

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Participant's Signature

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Date

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Researcher's Signature

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Date

APPENDIX D: TRANSCRIPT/DATA RELEASE FORM

I, \_\_\_\_\_ have read my transcripts and agree to release them. I have had the opportunity to read the transcripts to clarify, add or delete information so it will accurately represent my words. The procedure and its possible risks have been explained to me by either Melanie MacLean or Linda Wason-Ellam, and I understand them. I understand that my participation is completely voluntary that I may to withdraw from this study at any time without a penalty. I also understand that although the data from this study may be published, and/or presented at seminars and/or conferences, my identity will be kept completely confidential in the writing.

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Participant Signature

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Date

-----  
Researcher Signature

-----  
Date

I have retained a copy of this form for my records.

When you want to send me this form you can mail it to us: Melanie MacLean, Saskatoon Catholic Schools at 306-343-9731; Dr. Linda Wason-Ellam, Department of Curriculum Studies, College of Education, 28 Campus Drive, Saskatoon, SK, Canada S7N 0C2; or telephone for a pick-up at: 966-7578 (home 653-5844); or e-mail: [wasonell@duke.usask.ca](mailto:wasonell@duke.usask.ca).

