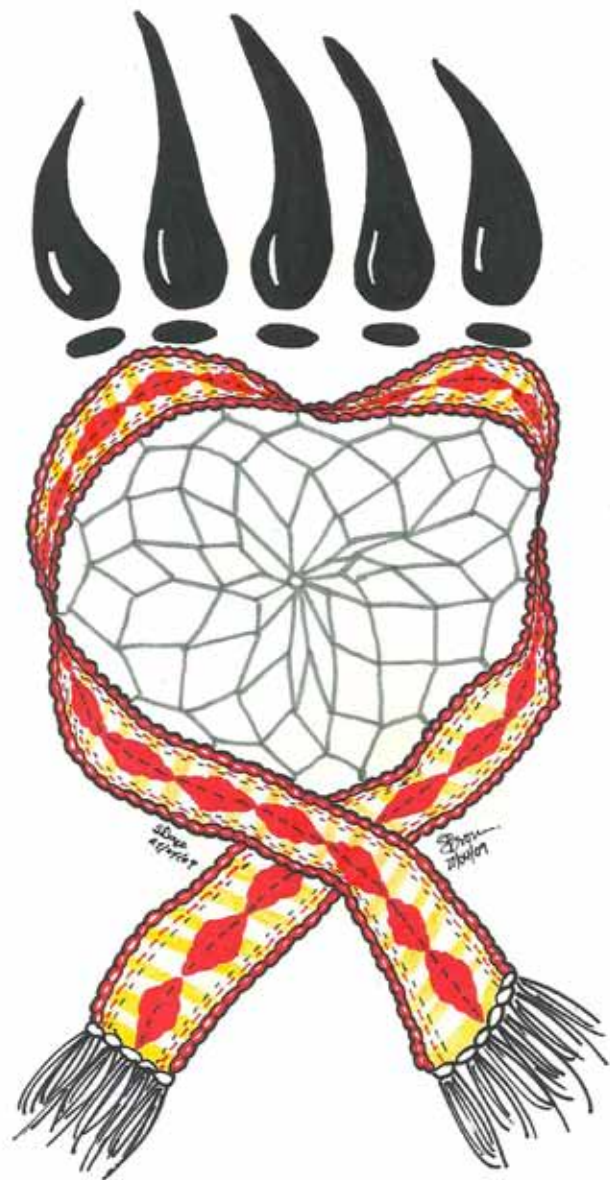


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# HEARTS AROUND THE FIRE: FIRST NATIONS WOMEN TALK ABOUT PROTECTING AND PRESERVING FIRST NATIONS CULTURES IN SASKATCHEWAN PUBLIC EDUCATION

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 SASKATCHEWAN  
**School Boards**  
ASSOCIATION

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Thanks is extended to Shelley Brown and Shelley Daye for providing the artwork. The bear paw is symbolic of power and protection and the colours yellow, red, white and black represent the spiritual, emotional, mental & physical health of First Nations people. The Métis sash symbolizes the pride of the Métis people. And we used the dream catcher to unite both First nations and Métis people & to show that nations united are stronger than any one alone and that they can support each other in power, health and friendship.

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## SUMMARY

This paper is a summary of research exploring ways of infusing the traditional knowledge of First Nations within public education systems. The entire thesis is available from the author or through the University of Regina. Readers who would like to learn more are encouraged to read the thesis and view the DVD videography that accompanies it. This paper explores public education systems in Saskatchewan through the hearts, minds and voices of First Nations women. First Nations women have been significantly absent from the written history of this land. Traditionally, women were the primary nurturers and caregivers of children, and the key teachers. In addition, women had specific decision-making powers that balanced the roles of men in communities. The influences of policies and practices of the British crown and subsequent Canadian government created distortions in our community structures and had devastating effects on child-rearing and community well-being.

Several points of inquiry prompted this study. After generations, is it possible to restore foundational First Nations cultural practices and values in a contemporary education system? Is it possible to protect and preserve these cultural practices and values, and languages and raise them as sound pedagogical practice that creates potential pathways of success for First Nations learners, and all children? Is it possible, through dialogue with First Nations women who have retained their First Language, to illuminate some key themes that could inform policy and practice?





## INTRODUCTION

Today, education is seen as the key to improving opportunities to be competitive in the job market, which in turn opens doors to better jobs and increased pay, which will contribute to breaking generational cycles of poverty in First Nations communities and urban centres. However, First Nations students in public education systems will continue to be left out of this prosperity if they do not continue in school long enough to graduate and make positive transitions into post-secondary education, careers and training. Likewise, if young First Nations learners fall behind academically in early elementary years, without appropriate and responsive interventions, gaps in their education will grow until, they leave school early without the necessary skills and confidence to engage in the work world, or in post-secondary training programs.

## THE IMPORTANCE OF BELONGING

In public education systems across Saskatchewan, many First Nations children do not have consistent culturally affirming education experiences, because the curriculum often reflects and affirms Western-European perspectives and worldviews.

Like many other First Nations students, it took me several years to build my confidence and self-esteem to the point where I felt I could be successful in university, having barely managed to jump the necessary hurdles to graduate with a Grade 12 diploma. When I finally summoned the courage to go to university at the Saskatchewan Indian Federated College (SIFC), 20 years later, my life changed. As a young undergraduate student, I took a number of classes trying to figure out where my strengths and interests were. At SIFC many of the students, the teachers, and other staff were First Nations. The content of our classes also reflected my First Nations identity. For the first time, I understood the importance of having a positive, wholistic school experience that reflected my identity, honoured who I was as a First Nations person and allowed me to believe in my ability to do well as an academic student. This was a significant period of reconnection for me. At SIFC, Elders were an integral part of the program, and they patiently helped me to renew my self-identity by providing me the place to shed my 'Indianness' and replace this facade with the positive, beautiful aspects of my First Nations identities. I was no longer 'Indian', nor was I 'native'. I shrugged off those labels, and with the patience of my teachers and the Elders, I came to understand who I am, and who my people are. Coming to know who I am has required an audit of the nasty landscape that I have internalized over many years.

## HONOURING AND AWAKENING THE LEARNING SPIRIT

The learning spirit has been described by the Canadian Council of Learning and the Aboriginal Learning Knowledge Centre as:

The role of finding self [in] a self-regulated and directed journey, often assisted or guided by others, although without intrusion or interruption...The learning journey that each person travels [should help them] to arrive comfortably at their own awareness of strengths, gifts, capacities, which broadly can be seen as their learning spirit...the life journey is one that draws each person to certain strengths and motivations, and is constantly evolving, emerging, transforming and yet remains with us throughout our lives. (Tunison, 2007, p. 10)

In my second year of undergraduate studies, I heard a Dakota man speak about traditional views of education. He wrote two words on the chalkboard: wakan heja. As he explained the meaning of these words, I realized that our people do see the world differently. My Dakota ancestors' image of the child was a being 'standing sacred' who remained closely connected to the Creator in the early years and therefore, could also teach us through this direct and sacred connection.

It was an important understanding in my early teaching career to combine the worldview of the Dakota with Friere's (1972) critique of the Western (Industrial school era) banking notion of education, which viewed children's minds as empty vessels, waiting to be filled with knowledge, thereby allowing "the imposition of one worldview over another, sometimes with a velvet glove" (as cited in Battiste, 1986, p. 37). In the Lakota worldview, there is a belief that adults have much to learn from children, especially when they are small. Belva Morrison, Sicangu Lakota (2003) describes this concept:

The first concept to consider is the belief that before a baby was born on this earth, she/he looked upon all the people and chose her/his mother and father. For this reason, parents felt blessed to have this spiritual being come into their lives. A child was considered sacred having arrived from the spiritual realm. A child was respected and treated as capable of understanding the most important part of living on this earth—the spiritual nature of life. Many adults would observe the actions and body language of a child to interpret what might happen in the near future. For example, if a child played at building a fire to keep warm, then the adults would know that this play meant a cold spell was coming. Children were treated with special loving care and never physically abused. The "beloved child" was one who was given extra attention; one whose moccasin soles were beaded because the child was held, carried, and loved so much. In the Lakota language the word for children is wakanyeja, "wakan" meaning sacred. (¶ 2)

Public education will not revert to the era of Industrial schools or Residential schools (during this research, I witnessed the Prime Minister's apology for the generational devastation of residential schools). Today, the Ministry of Education in Saskatchewan is building a wholistic model of education through the renewal of K-12 curriculum to include First Nations and Métis ways of knowing in all areas of the learning program (Saskatchewan Learning, 2007, p. 6).

These are hopes for all children, not only First Nations, because I believe that the most innovative transformations in education will depend on the dominant society's ability to embrace the traditional values of the peoples they once sought to assimilate.





We have opportunities, in the coming years, to enrich and deepen western curricula with traditional knowledge and values. If we are able to move beyond our fear of the ‘other’<sup>1</sup>, that is those peoples, including First Nations people, that society has come to regard as “other than the norm” (Kumashiro, 2001, p. 3), we have the ability to create tremendous hope for future generations. We are conditioned to avoid discussions about our differences and the existence of racism in our society. Such discussions stir up strong emotions, such as anger, shame, and pain, or sorrow. One of our greatest challenges will be to find ways to come together in dialogues that serve to build understanding, past the anger, shame, pain and sorrow, to a more hopeful place beyond the barriers that separate people based on differences. In schools, the primary goal must be to ensure the success and wholistic well-being of all students. We are all a product of the assimilationist past, and we are all part of a place where racism grew between First Nations people and those who came to settle on this land, and as such, it will be difficult to create positive solutions without coming together.

## **AN URGENCY FOR ACTION**

Since our First Nations leaders challenged the government’s White Paper in 1972, and countered this proposal with the Indian Control of Indian Education, there has been an urgency to act (National Indian Brotherhood, 1972). The Regina Leader Post recently published a story about a report, based on data released by Statistics Canada (2005), which stated, “70 per cent of off-reserve First Nations scored below the benchmark considered to be the minimum for an individual to cope in a complex knowledge-based society. The study also found the proportion of low-scoring adults was much lower among non-aboriginals, at 37 per cent, in urban Saskatchewan” (January 8, 2008).

The Canadian Council on Learning published a report called, “The State of Learning in Canada: No Time for Complacency”, which revealed the need for urgent action to address First Nations education across Canada (as well as the need to redefine education for the success of all learners in contemporary worlds). The report indicates:

[There are] relatively higher rates of adult unemployment and single parenthood, [and that] poverty affects more than four in ten Aboriginal children. Many youngsters are also growing up in poor health and unsuitable living conditions, which can impede their early development and capacity to learn... [and] the proportion of young Aboriginal adults who had not completed high school was more than 2.5 times higher than among the non-Aboriginal population. (Battiste, 2005, p. 5)

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<sup>1</sup> Kevin Kumashiro (2001) uses the term ‘other’ as a way of naming groups who have traditionally been marginalized in dominant society, including but not limited to First nations people in Canada.



Dropout rates, academic failure, low levels of literacy, increased incarceration, suicide, poverty --all data tells a story. What is that story? We have been trying since 1972. How can we try differently? What is missing? What can we do that will really bring about change? Where do First Nations educators fit within existing structures built on Western paradigms?

Existing data suggest that progress has been made in Aboriginal learning outcomes, particularly over the past two decades. Still, a significant gap remains between Aboriginal Peoples and non-Aboriginal Canadians, especially in the area of university completion. However, the educational indicators widely used by governments and researchers, including years of schooling and performance on standardized tests, only partially reflect the lifelong learning goals and values of Aboriginal Peoples. (Canadian Council on Learning, 2007, p. 11)

Similarly, data on language loss tell us that of the “50 or more individual languages belonging to 11 Aboriginal language families... reflecting distinctive histories, cultures and identities linked to family, community, the land and traditional knowledge” (Norris, 2007, p. 19), many are in danger of becoming extinct. In Canada, “over the past 100 years or more, at least ten once-flourishing languages have become extinct” (p. 19). Even the strongest of our Saskatchewan language groups, Cree, is showing rapid decline and loss. In November, 2007, Elders at the Saskatchewan Indian Cultural Centre’s Language Keeper’s Conference reflected on the data regarding language loss, and spoke about the fact that there are only three fluent Lakota speakers remaining in our province, and as few as 25 fluent Nakota speakers (“Aboriginal languages”, 2006). This statement had a profound effect on many participants. I recall looking around the room and witnessing the quiet hush, the heads lowered, people looking down, some people were covering their mouths, and some were shaking their heads. It was on the same level as witnessing a tragic accident. It is a haunting statement, and prompts me to ask: “What can I do? How can what I do help to change this?” It is in my consciousness, therefore, I have made it a deliberate part of the research and work I do with schools. I fear it is not enough.

As the population of First Nations students grows in our province, so must teachers’ understanding of them. This province’s history (as well as histories around the world) has been presented to students, largely devoid of Indigenous worldviews and the positive contributions of Indigenous peoples in the shaping of our country. Creating an educational system that places First Nations and Métis education as foundational, as the province is currently endeavouring to do, is a positive step towards dismantling this hegemonic approach to education.





There have been some significant changes in provincial public education in the past 30 years, but as change occurs, it reveals areas for further improvements and modifications. Saskatchewan continues to operate within the confines of a K-12 education model, divided into elementary and high school, operating within schools that continue to look, sound and function the way they have for generations. During the course of this research some hopeful changes have occurred. For example, on December 10, 2007, the speech from the throne included mandatory treaty education for all students in Saskatchewan (retrieved from <http://www.gov.sk.ca/> on October 3, 2008). The Office of the Treaty Commissioner will distribute K-6 treaty materials in classrooms to complement Grades 7-12 materials available since 2002. The development of such materials speaks to the fact that children in public schools are not learning about the unique treaty relationships in Saskatchewan. Also, during the course of this research study, the Saskatchewan Ministry of Education began a renewal of provincial curricula. This renewal includes the infusion of First Nations and Métis content and perspectives throughout all areas of study, and in all grade levels (Saskatchewan Learning, 2007, p. 6). While the current focus is to infuse First Nations and Métis content, perspectives, and worldviews as a foundation into all subject areas of the curriculum, this raises other challenges such as the inclusion of spirituality, ceremony and the accompanying protocols and necessary conduct and behaviours for young people to participate in them. These elements are necessary in order to create wholistic models of education. Overall, these are hopeful signs that move provincial education beyond the limited options available to students previously, in which Native Studies 10, 20 and 30 courses were offered as optional credits in the Social Sciences and not available in all schools. For many students Native Studies 10, 20 or 30 is often their first awareness of the cultures, histories and contributions of First Nations peoples.

The Coalition for the Advancement of Aboriginal Studies (CAAS) published a report in 2002 outlining a list of facts and knowledge that all students in Canada should have by the time they graduate from high school, which they call “Proposed Learning Expectations”. Included in the learning expectations are: learning about the worldviews of Aboriginal peoples, learning about the impacts of colonization on Aboriginal peoples, learning about the histories and contributions of Aboriginal peoples, exploring ways to address environmental, economic, social and political change through Aboriginal ways of knowing, and developing personal skills that forward human rights, community building and increasing positive self-identity (CAAS, 2002). This report also provides support for teachers in moving beyond simple additive approaches to education to a broader understanding of the historical context of colonization and the silencing of Indigenous Knowledge in education systems. For many First Nations parents and grandparents, who were disconnected from their cultures, they may be learning information about their own history for the first time. This presents a powerful opportunity for schools in building learning spaces where students, and their families and communities might learn together.

## ANIMATING AND TEACHING THROUGH NATURAL CYCLES: THE WHEEL OF LIFE

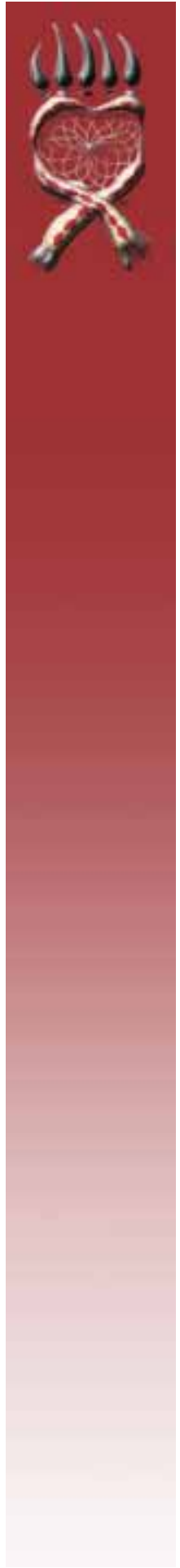
I had the opportunity to listen to Peter Nippi (Nakawe) talk about how traditional Nakawe cultural values and teachings were transmitted over many generations in his community. He shared teachings from his grandfather who said that the values and belief systems must be taught when the child is born, in fact even while the mother is carrying that child, and throughout their early years. Once the child is “this high” (he indicated with his hand a height of about 5 feet), it is already too late. They have already become too set in their ways (Nippi, unpublished notes, January 24, 2008). Every aspect of our colonized experience contributes to cracks in the cycles of our community wellness. As First Nations educators we must first recognize what was lost, in order to reclaim, protect and nurture.

Nippi’s illustration of the circle of life (Figure 1) shows the natural cycle of our lives. Within that cycle are important rites of passage that carry us from one stage of our life to the next, and onward to another spiritual dimension (from which we came). (Nippi, unpublished notes, January 24, 2008).



*Figure 1: The Nakawe Circle of Life*

Our success will come when all young children are learning about the values, belief systems and languages of First Nations people, beginning in their earliest education experiences. Then, when a child gets to be “this high” (five feet or so), their learning spirit will be engaged and active. They will be equipped to make informed choices and decisions, and to be critical consumers of public education. They will be equipped to confidently and respectfully challenge and offer critical insights, grounded as Nehiyawak (Cree), Anishinabe/Nakawe (Saulteaux), Dene, Dakota, Lakota, Nakoda, Métis young people, ready to participate in the building of a future harmonious and successful province. It is imperative that we maintain our hopefulness, in spite of all that has been lost. Dr. Marie Battiste, Mi’Kmaq (2004) believes that we need to think of these times in education, and in society, not as “a time after colonialism, but rather...an aspiration, a hope, not yet achieved. It constructs a strategy that responds to the experience of colonization and imperialism” (p. 1).





Issues of First Nations education are complex. What does First Nations education mean in a contemporary context in public education, where the student body is diverse, not only with diverse individuals, but with a diversity of First Nations. Many young people are at different places on the continuum of understanding their own identity as First Nations in a contemporary world. Although the term First Nations implies a plural of “nations”, we have come no further in understanding the First Nations people of our province. Who are the Dakota in our province? Where are the Lakota people? Are all Cree people in the province the same? Where do the Nakoda currently live? How many Saulteaux nations are there in our province? Who are the Dene? In Saskatchewan, we are situated on the traditional territories of the Cree, Dakota, Lakota/ Dakota, Saulteaux and Dene peoples. Much of what children know stems from their understanding of this landscape as an agricultural space, divided by borders and fences. What is little known and understood is the significance of this land as a ‘place’ of our ancestors.

### **THE SIGNIFICANCE OF LAND: THE SPIRIT OF PLACE**

Beneath the artificial and manmade boundaries that we have become accustomed to, in Saskatchewan and across North America, is the ‘text’ of our history as Indigenous peoples. It is written on the land. The stories are held in the places we gathered, the areas we visited to make spiritual connection to our ancestors and the Creator. These places are still there, but when our children do not know about these places, and never have opportunities to experience being there, they cannot connect to them and therefore, they cannot protect and preserve them.

For the education system to truly respond to the needs and aspiration of First Nations people, the change must be visionary and transformational. Without returning to the places of disconnection, how is it possible to find the places of reconnection? As an educator, and a parent I am struggling to find those places of reconnection, where cultural identity can be restored to a generation whose success lies in knowing who they are, where their people are from, and what their roles and responsibilities are. True, it is possible for us, as Indian people, to become successful without knowing our cultural identities, but who will then protect our languages and traditional belief systems, which our ancestors have held onto so strongly, through generations? What importance will there be to speak any other language besides English, and perhaps the languages that motivate economic wealth? What purpose will there be for ceremonies to be continued, besides contemporary activities such as competition powwows and fund-raising round dances, with integrity, and with honour and respectful connection to the spirits of our ancestors?

Most importantly, how can the wisdom of our knowledge keepers guide us in protecting our vast, rich, and complex cultures from becoming trivialized, stereotypical representations of who we are? If we lose hope in our ability to build the next generation of young people who can protect and preserve our cultures, then we have truly lost hope.

## THE SIGNIFICANCE OF LANGUAGE: THE SPIRIT OF BREATH

Years ago, I listened to a presentation about the sacredness of breath and sound. I remain moved by this description. To know that each word uttered is not just one voice. “Breath is sacred, it is from the Creator and is used to communicate on a Spiritual level” (Fineday, personal communication, May, 2003). Our words, then, must be honoured as the breath that carries the spirit of ancestors and the Creator. Likewise, Cajete (2005) talks of “Hah oh...a Tewa phrase sometimes used to connote the process of learning. Its literal translation is to breathe in. Hah oh is an Indian metaphor that describes the perception of traditional tribal education” (p. 71). The essence of this concept informed my decision to undertake a research project that does not take the words and breath from the Elders in order to flatten it to paper. Who has access to such words on paper? Who benefits from the wisdom that was shared in sacred breath? If our intent is to honour the wisdom and knowledge of our old people, then we must be willing to pave pathways into Western systems that create the space for new ways of understanding.

As a young child, I was completely disconnected from my culture and traditions, although I was fortunate to learn a second language in the home of my adopted family. Knowing two languages has helped me recognize that I have insight into understanding how privileged my English language is, and how narrow and rigid its ability to articulate my thoughts through another language lens. Knowing this helps me empathize with Elders when they show a reluctance to translate into English the teachings and values of traditional belief systems.

Who we are is important to our remembering. I have come to my own understanding that in order to know who I am and where my people come from, I cannot rely solely on written texts and curriculum. It does not matter what the quality of the materials or resources is, if I do not go to those places, be with those people, listen, observe, learn, reflect and participate, I know nothing. Experiential learning has been a key in transforming my understanding of the richness of human resources that exist beyond books and texts. With this is an accompanying need to proceed with sensitivity and with an understanding of the protocols necessary to respectfully engage these resource persons.

I learned that my surname, Whiteman, comes from long ago, earned by an old warrior who came across the Medicine Line that separated Canada from the United States (long before it was called an international border). He was referred to as ‘Old Dacotah’, but his Dakota name was Wasicu Wajila, which translated roughly to ‘One Whiteman left Standing Alone’. The only word that made its way to the page was ‘Whiteman’. Those marks on paper remained in the ledger books and census records; the story of ‘One Whiteman Standing Alone’ remain only in our oral history. When my late uncle told me this story, he used the gestures that I often see when old people are telling stories. Furthermore, his tone and facial expressions worked to ensure I understood, and by doing this he taught me about who I am, and where I come from. With that understanding, I carried a responsibility to pass this knowledge on to my children. He also told me, “Indian People must value their history: it is a sacred responsibility... our oral history speaks of this responsibility” (Whiteman, personal communication, June, 2001).





The loss of balance in individuals eroded the balance of communities, generation after generation. These days, young people seem to navigate a place between white society and traditional lifestyle that causes confusion and loss of cultural identity. It is no wonder the traditional Elders are concerned. They see how precious our time is; they are sensitive to the fact that our oldest language speakers are passing away. The Elders talked about “the things that they need to bring back: The knowledge keepers. The people that kept the knowledge, the history and the values to share with us...We have great respect for that knowledge and those natural laws that we are going to talk about...” (Johnston, 2002, p. 1). Elders see First Nations Traditional Education as a circle and Western Education as a square. Disruptions in our history caused distorted attempts to try to convince ourselves that a circle could be square and vice versa. We have forgotten our sacred responsibility to continue to transmit our cultural knowledge and values to younger generations.

Colonization of First Nations has seriously affected their lives, and the people feel the oppressive nature of prejudice and racism in Canadian society. Very early colonists justified land seizures; removed First Nations from their homelands and put them on isolated and under resourced reserves; imposed residential and federal day schools and compulsory English colonial education; subjected them to overt, covert and systemic racism; imposed disempowering policies, practices and attitudes that have continued to the present, restricting their movement, livelihood, and survival. As a result, it is understandable but tragic that First Nations youth have the highest school departures before graduation, the highest suicide rates, highest incarceration rates, and perform far below the achievement and employment rates of average Canadians....little is known about First Nations learning, development, knowledge and language for much of the research has focused on their ‘incapacity’ and little on their potential for influencing positive transformation in their own in and in Canadian Society in generation. (Battiste, 2005, p. 5)

## **THE WISDOM OF ELDERS IN PUBLIC EDUCATION**

Long ago, the individuals in communities who held specific wisdom and knowledge, or who had been given gifts held a special place in the community; they were respected because of these abilities. Often those who had knowledge and wisdom were old people, who had lived a long life in the traditional values and belief systems. These individuals were given gifts such as the ability of healing, to know plants and medicines, to act as orators and storytellers, to be ceremonialists. These individual gifts would have been recognized and nurtured by older members of the community. The term, ‘Elder’, is a contemporary term. I have come to understand from talking to people in First Nations communities that this term would not have been used in the way that we now use it in our contemporary times. In the Cree language, the people who had progressed through the life cycle to be old were simply the ‘kohkums and moshoms’, “kehteyak”; these were the old people in our communities, and they had individual abilities to share wisdom and knowledge in a variety of ways, from telling historical or sacred stories, leading ceremonies, healing, helping to deliver babies, to counsel and provide advice, and to share the many skills they had honed over a lifetime.

One of my first struggles, as I traced my steps back home, was in understanding who was an Elder. I was instructed to talk to an Elder, yet I did not know who was an Elder, making it impossible to know who to approach. Today, I am often asked questions about Elders by the teachers and young people I work with in schools. Spending time in the community with older people and traditional teachers has helped me to have a better understanding of why this concept may be confusing

for Western educators, and why it raises significant concerns in public schools. In Saskatchewan, the education system is within a structure called the K-12 Curriculum that is divided into grades and seven required areas of study. When we invite Elders in, how can we ensure that we are truly welcoming and inviting their knowledge to be part of the existing structures of education? Many educators are keen to learn about First Nations and Métis cultures, and are sincere in their desire to create affirming learning environments that are truly reflective of the society we share. In light of a renewed curriculum and a mandate for treaty education in the province, this desire for increased understanding is fundamental to growth and development in the Saskatchewan teaching profession.

In the contemporary Saskatchewan educational milieu, it has become increasingly necessary to redefine curricula to include First Nations content and perspectives. In the quest to do so, teachers are often advised to seek the guidance of Elders. In preparing themselves, they are counselled to follow traditional protocols, which have come to be known as giving a package or pouch of tobacco, an honorarium or gift, and providing reimbursement of expenses. Respect is shown when the Elder enters the building. A comfortable seat and perhaps a cup of tea and food is offered to them. A teacher might talk to the Elder about the students and the school, about units of study and lessons being taught. The Elder might be asked to share their knowledge with the students, on topics such as... 'life long ago', 'Residential Schools', 'the tipi', 'powwows', to 'tell stories' or 'respect', etc.. Long ago, if we asked the Elder with tobacco, a response would not necessarily come quickly, or at all. The pressure of time was not as it is now. Elders working in schools will often adapt to these time structures because they understand that paradigm, and want to be accommodating, but this adaptation is not without loss in full understanding of the context of traditional education.

The work of Elders in schools is an important exercise in protecting and preserving culture, and a means of fulfilling their roles in teaching younger generations. There is one thing that is without question. If an Elder provides us with advice or a teaching, we must reflect upon it and apply it in a way that makes sense in our lives. We owe it to the Elder to be truthful in our request. The Elder, with tobacco, has no choice but to be truthful in their reply. To give tobacco is a personal and profound act. There is no question that including Elders in public education is extremely important as we transform education to include First Nations worldviews; however, it is vital that our communities and old people take a role in asserting their voices in the articulation of the roles and the purpose of Elders in schools.

For educators, it will become important to know what the existing protocols are, and to develop a deeper understanding of the ways that First Nations knowledge keepers are contemporarily defined. After all, Elders, like the communities they come from are diverse, and people as cultural resources, should not be limited to those we have come to contemporarily define as Elders. There are role models and knowledge keepers of all ages in our communities, both on and off reserve, who have been successful in balancing their traditional First Nations identities with their success in mainstream society. Despite the many adaptations since the signing of treaties across the Saskatchewan Plains, a foundational core of our worldviews has been based on the delicate and important balancing of gender roles, in order to successfully protect and preserve our cultural identities as First Nations.





Elders remind us that we should strive to do everything “in a good way”. I understand this to mean that we will use our knowledge for purposes that will benefit, not harm, others, and that will contribute to the well-being of the tiospaye (community). In the process of leading our lives in such a fashion, our actions tell a story of their own. Teaching and research are much the same in this regard: that we act toward outcomes, based on our personal practical knowledge, and then turn the moment inward, to a place of reflective inquiry to inform our future practice (or action).

As a First Nation researcher, I am tasked with a cultural responsibility to carry out my research “in a good way”. This task carries within it an imperative to include the story of our past in which the collision of worldviews and the resulting clash of stories, experiences and knowledge of self created over time have resulted in the current crisis in education, which sees the grandchildren of the original people failing in the educational system. The place in which we come together in the conversation with Elders, includes the spirit of our ancestors, the pain and grief of loss of culture, the legacy of colonization, as well as the hope for future generations, yet unborn. This is a profound and sacred place.

## **THE STRENGTH OF INDIGENOUS WAYS OF KNOWING**

In the process of gathering the stories for this study, the women I interviewed, Georgina Musqua and Judy Bear, shared their lived experiences through remembrances prompted by prayer, smudging, the offering of traditional tobacco protocol and by listening to each other. In the past, I have heard Elders share teachings in which they tell the listeners that the ancestors are with us. For First Nations people, telling stories is a spiritual act because it requires us to maintain the original source of the information, and use the gift of our breath to tell the story in a way that maintains its original intent, whether it is historical or moral teaching. The act of telling stories, therefore, immediately prompts a connection between the present space we are situated in (and with all of our current understandings, thoughts and emotions) and the past (and the wisdom that has been shared through generations via the oral tradition). This connection is intended to remind us of our cultural responsibility to act on behalf of all those who have gone and all those yet to come.

Elders always speak to the importance of Indigenous knowledges teaching that we need to ‘go within’ to know who we are—to be strong. Inherent in this teaching is the importance of rediscovering and being grounded in Indigenous ways of knowing and being. (Greenwood, Tagalik, Joyce, & de Leeuw, 2004, p. 6)

Throughout this study, I sought to respond to the need for greater understanding of the ways that Indigenous knowledge could inform education policy, practices and curriculum in Saskatchewan public education. For the purposes of this research, I focused on provincial public education systems only. I have not included the potential impact of outcomes as applied to a band school setting, which is a federal responsibility.



There is sensitivity in approaching research with First Nations people. This stems from decades of research done by those outside of our communities, often without authority to do so, or whose work did not contribute to the well-being or advancement of the community/people being studied. This history of research has created a climate of mistrust and suspicion among our old people, who have been witness to such unethical practice. First Nations have been researched for many years, often as a dying culture, exotic and strange, and in need of civilization. Fortunately, we are in a renaissance of Indigenous research that is being carried about by Indigenous researchers, about living cultures, which are being revitalized and renewed, and whose ways of knowing have much to contribute to local and global well-being.

Solutions for the complex issues in First Nations education cannot be found when First Nations people are not part of the discussion, the planning, and the action. Contemporary Indigenous researchers recognize the growing body of research done by non-Indigenous scholars as creating windows on the world of the people being researched, and question how this usage can be any different or serve any other purpose than to display our cultures as exotic specimens for the curiosity of onlookers who may look and listen, but perhaps not be moved to challenge themselves to think differently about what they see. Without specific prompts and supports to guide researchers unfamiliar with First Nations cultures, it is unlikely that they will look beyond the surface, to the underlying currents. To enter into that place of deep reflection requires a period of struggle, which is a difficult place to be in. For decades First Nations people have resided in that place of struggle, as they seek to maintain their cultural identity in the midst of an onslaught of practices of assimilation and policy.

As a First Nations woman, I struggled throughout the creation of this research project. The fact remains that I must still honour the criteria of Western academia, which was only part of the struggle for me. My years of elementary and high school, and an undergraduate degree prepared me to follow instructions, and to make sure that I have completed the checklists and expectations required of me, so that my reward would follow. The greatest struggle has been the constant tension of looking beyond the existing academic structures, and into the research process, to see possible places where Indigenous ways of knowing and being could exist, without compromising the integrity of the women participants. To me, the research had to look different, and sound different.





## THE SASKATCHEWAN LANDSCAPE: FIRST NATIONS EDUCATION<sup>2</sup> IN PUBLIC EDUCATION

In Saskatchewan, provincial schools have endeavoured for more than 20 years to include the content and perspectives of First Nations people. The Ministry of Education<sup>3</sup> has also published policy and implementation guides on a variety of topics to further First Nations and Métis education in provincial schools. In 1984, the Saskatchewan Department of Education developed an action plan for curriculum development, entitled, *Directions: A Five Year Action Plan for Native Curriculum Development*. This action plan outlined specific recommendations for First Nations education in the province of Saskatchewan, and contributed to the policy, which has been part of the introduction of every K-12 curriculum guide published in Saskatchewan.

The first policy document for First Nations education in Saskatchewan, the *Indian and Métis Education Policy from Kindergarten to Grade-12* was written in 1989, and subsequently revised in 1995. This policy is currently being renewed to reflect the current government mandate (publication pending). The policy states:

Saskatchewan Education recognizes that the Indian and Métis peoples of the province are historically unique peoples, occupying a unique and rightful place in society. Saskatchewan Education recognizes that education programs must meet the needs of Indian and Métis students, and that changes to existing programs are also necessary for the benefit of all students. (Saskatchewan Education, 1995, p. 2)

Community Schools were introduced in Saskatchewan in 1980. The policy document for community education in Saskatchewan, *Building Communities of Hope: Best Practices for Meeting the Learning Needs of At-Risk and Indian and Métis Students* (1997) states that “the original Community Schools Program was implemented in 1980 to address urban Aboriginal poverty” (p. 5). The first community schools were designated based on the numbers of ‘at risk’ children, many of whom were (and continue to be) of First Nations ancestry. The policy further states:

As the numbers of Indian and Métis students in the public education system continue to grow, efforts to provide responsive, culturally affirming, and academically challenging programs that strengthen their opportunities to succeed become even more important. Community Schools employ Indian and Métis teachers and teacher associates whenever possible. They provide curriculum, learning materials and a learning environment that affirms the identity, culture and values of Indian and Métis peoples. (Saskatchewan Education, 1997, p. 5, author’s emphasis)

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<sup>2</sup> The terminology referring to First Nations people in Saskatchewan provincial policy and programming, has shifted from “Indian and Métis”, to “Aboriginal”, and is currently “First Nations and Métis”.

<sup>3</sup> Saskatchewan’s education department has recently been changed from, Saskatchewan Learning, to the Saskatchewan Ministry of Education. Previously, this department has also been called Saskatchewan Education, and the Department of Education.

The Saskatchewan Minister of Education has had a long-standing advisory committee consisting of a broad cross-representation of educational stakeholders who view First Nations and Métis education as a foundation for learning for all students in Saskatchewan. The predecessors to this advisory committee presented Saskatchewan's first Aboriginal education action plan to the Minister of Education 24 years ago. In 1995, a subsequent action plan with recommendations was presented by the newly formed Indian and Métis Education Advisory Committee (IMEAC). This committee prompted the development of the current Aboriginal Education Provincial Advisory Committee (AEPAC), which is the longest standing ministerial advisory committee in Saskatchewan. AEPAC has published an action plan, based on four key areas of recommendation, including: Cultural Affirmation and School Climate, Shared Decision Making, Core Curriculum Actualization, and Life Long Learning (Saskatchewan Learning, 2000, p. 6-7). AEPAC is critical in maintaining the provincial gaze on First Nations and Métis education. The 2004 follow-up report examined the state of education since 2000 and provided a focused set of priorities for future directions (Saskatchewan Learning, 2004, p. 3). This priorities report expired in 2007, and has led to the renewal of the K-12 First Nations and Métis education policy, an implementation strategy called A Time for Significant Leadership that supports schools in developing goals for First Nations and Métis education, linked to the current provincial accountability strategy, The Continuous Improvement Framework. A Branch within the Saskatchewan Ministry of Education, devoted to First Nations and Métis Education, was established in April, 2007, and works on the development and renewal of policy and implementation strategies, curriculum support, and building partnerships with First Nations and Métis stakeholders (retrieved from <http://www.sasked.gov.sk.ca> on March 22, 2008).

Despite many inroads toward equity in education, many First Nations students are left behind by education systems that are inflexible. The socioeconomic conditions of many First Nations directly correlate to their experiences as oppressed, marginalized peoples. Successful strategies can only be built when all layers of the complex issues in First Nations education are considered. Kawagley (2006) argues that:

Indigenous peoples of the world have experienced varying degrees of disruption or loss with regard to their traditional lifestyles and worldviews. This disruption has contributed to the many psychosocial maladies that are extant in indigenous societies today...these cultures, having been characterized as primitive and backward and therefore wanting, are subjected to an endless stream of assimilative processes to bring their practitioners into mainstream society. The indigenous peoples are forced to live in a constructed and psychic world not of their own making or choosing. Little is left in their lives to remind them of their indigenous culture; nor is there recognition of their indigenous consciousness and its application of intelligence, ingenuity, creativity, and inventiveness in the making of their world. (p. 2)





This intergenerational loss continues to complicate our dreams for the future. Through the years, the Canadian public has developed a collective understanding of the shaping of history rooted in the “positivistic atmosphere that [was] part of an Enlightenment tradition which had deep roots in European philosophy” (Preston, 2005, p. 58). First Nations peoples were placed in institutions in which the concept of knowledge was based upon “this Eurocentric paradigm of education [that] mirrors the beliefs, values, traditions, practices and normative expectations of those comprising the culture of domination” (Burns, 2001). Indigenous knowledge and ways of knowing have only recently been included in the shaping of education systems, and this inclusion creates a great need for understanding the distinctions between the Western and Indigenous worldviews that have been unveiled by many Indigenous researchers, including Battiste and Barman (1995), Ermine (2000), Kirkness (1992), Sefa Dei (2000), and Steinhauer (2002). This is captured in the following description:

Western educational practices dissect and disconnect knowledge, whereas Native Ways of Knowing presume a wholistic context. The primary difference between the two lies in the emphasis of Native Ways of Knowing on knowing as a verb and Western education practices that emphasize the accumulation of knowledge, a noun. (Warner, 2006, p. 150)

In the Saulteaux/Ojibwe worldview, knowledge for the pursuit of gaining knowledge is problematic.

First, Ojibwe pedagogy privileges knowledge rooted in oral traditions flowing through the complex authority of Elders over book knowledge...[second], knowledge of and stories about the past in lived moments of oral exchange are never simply locked up in bygone eras; they become tangible realities that create a felt relationship with the past that cannot easily be engendered in histories that are written and read alone... finally...exchanges between [teacher] Elder and student are typically ceremonialized...seeking knowledge, a student offers tobacco to the Elder and thereby creates a relationship heavily ramified with traditional associations. (McNally, 2004, p. 606)

Herein lies an important distinction between First Nations and Western worldviews that must be recognized and understood in order to build bridges of understanding between two worlds.

In 1873, at the negotiations of Treaty 3, Chief Sah-katch-eway (Lac Seule) was reported to have said to Alexander Morris:

If you give what I ask, the time may come when I will ask you to lend me one of your daughters and one of your sons to live with us; and in return I will lend you one of my daughters and one of my sons for you to teach what is good, and after they have learned, to teach us. (Morris, 1979, p. 63)

McPherson believes the time has come to “act upon the wishes of Chief Sah-katch-eway...to date the lending of our children has all been one way...It is time we, the Aboriginal peoples, begin to teach our sons and daughters our own values once again” (McPherson, 2006).

'School' in Saskatchewan was not created to benefit First Nations children. The school year was designed to work within an agricultural construct thereby replacing the hunting, gathering and nomadic societies of the First Nations. A different kind of education was created for the children of Indian people, based on a model of assimilation into a Western European-influenced society:

In 1879, the federal government commissioned a report evaluating the American policy favouring separate Indian residential schools. The Americans believed that Indian children were best prepared for assimilation into the dominant society if they were removed from the influences of home, family, and community. (Barman, Hébert, & McCaskill, 1986, p. 6)

Residential schools left a legacy of cultural loss and devastation, coupled with a deep and systemic racism that flourished under the surface of the landscape we cohabited. People in Saskatchewan, including the First Nations people, came to believe the stereotypes, and misconceptions at both ends of the spectrum of 'brutal savage' and 'romanticized noble savage', leading to the devastation of generations of First Nations children in school systems, which continues to this day. This was particularly destructive for First Nations women, whose identity was virtually removed from historical accounts, despite their important and vital role within their community.

During interviews with Elders at the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples in 1996, it was learned that:

Elders [had deep concerns] about the current state of education. While they do not reject participation in Canadian education, they question the exclusion of traditional knowledge and its methods of transmission. They see that young people and adults emerge from school with a confused state of identity and without the basic cultural knowledge to participate fully in the traditions of their society. (retrieved from [http://www.ainc-inac.gc.ca/ch/rcap/sg/si50\\_e.html](http://www.ainc-inac.gc.ca/ch/rcap/sg/si50_e.html) on July 18, 2005)

During the period that followed the residential school era came a period of integration, which began in 1942. During this time, the aim was to integrate students from federal schools to provincial schools. For First Nations, this policy was translated into an education system that shifted from overt forms of cultural obliteration to more subtle assimilative practices that continued to emphasize the hegemonic curriculum. Opportunities to prepare teachers and adapt curriculum were not part of the integration of First Nations students. As a result the underlying assumptions and stereotypes remained intact (Kirkness, 1992). In 1969 the Government of Canada prepared a position paper known as the White Paper that attempted to shift education, among other federal responsibilities, to the provinces in the hopes of dismantling the Indian Act, thereby, shrugging off government commitments made in the treaties by the Queen to the Indians of Canada. In 1972, the National Indian Brotherhood responded with the landmark document, Indian Control of Indian Education (National Indian Brotherhood, 1972). This document paved the way for a significant change in the education system in Canada.





## HONOURING AND PROTECTING INDIGENOUS KNOWLEDGE IN RESEARCH

Many Indigenous researchers and academics have discussed decolonizing methods when approaching research. Smith (1999), Battiste and Youngblood Henderson (2000), O'Meara and West (1996), Stiffarm (1998) and Mihesuah (1998) have argued that we contribute to our own colonized existence when we maintain the same approaches, despite our knowledge that they do not honour our knowledge systems with the integrity and respect they deserve. Through my research, it has been my intent to present a method that de-emphasizes written text as the primary means of disseminating my findings in a way that honours a traditional research method that allows the complete and robust thought, gesture, tone and inflection of each speaker's voice to remain with their spirit. The times I spent in learning from old people and in ceremonies have resonated with me and have planted the seeds for this method. Without the engagement of all my senses, and the wholeness of being in the presence of the Elders, I could never have grasped the richness of this way of knowing and being that is the gift of my ancestors.

I had read many books in university about First Nations, many of them written by non-First Nations. I thought I understood the text and could easily apply it to a real understanding of the wisdom of my ancestors. Until I was challenged to be with Elders and to learn in a different way I realized that I was also challenging a lifetime of accumulated biases, learned in my years immersed in Western education systems. I finally began to see a tiny glimmer of understanding about my cultures, but this small revelation illuminated my vast ignorance. There is much yet to learn! As I continue my lifelong journey of learning in both Western and Indigenous ways of knowing, I focus on finding balance between the two. There is much we can learn from one another.

The links between past and present are told with clarity by the mother of a student attending an inner city school in Winnipeg:

I remember going to a residential school. I was used as labour for the school...given little food, not enough...when your body weakens, so does your mind and spirit...My children started school on reservation land...It was a place where they didn't look at healing the spirit - a place where they taught the child but the family was not part of this teaching...I remember my son getting into trouble. He felt he wasn't safe at the school - he wanted to escape...I wanted a place where he could return to the teachings of the land, a place that would not see him as a failure but as a possibility of hope, a place where culture was not taught as an add-on but as something that was embedded in his life. (Pearce, 2005, p. 343)

Over time, the intergenerational impacts on our people have resulted in immeasurable changes. "This troubling legacy is still continuing to affect peoples' lives today, as it will continue through several more generations without significant change" (Battiste, 2004, p. 3). Despite this, tiny sparks of hope remained, held tightly in the spirit of our ancestors, and within the environment, the land, the water, the sky, the cosmos. That knowledge is still there, waiting for us, and for the time when we return to our traditional responsibilities as healthy individuals, within healthy communities.

Elders talk about the ways they kept their language alive, how ceremonies continued ‘underground’. They also tell stories about how leaders, men and women, emerged from this dark period, and how they began to organize themselves in order to keep the cultures alive and well. Alex White Plume is an Oglala Lakota, who tells of the ways that our old people protected our culture long ago. He relates that “in 1890 our language and ceremonies were outlawed, in fact everything related to our identity as Lakotas was outlawed...so we could no longer practice our way of life wholly and so everything was taken underground” (Chapman, 2002, p. 57).

It is necessary to mourn significant losses. In our cultures, there are often ceremonies held to mark those losses, provide a place for grieving, to honour the lost one, and to build strength within the community to move forward; knowing that loss is inevitable in our lives. We must mourn the loss of the old ways. We must name it, and help those working with First Nations children to understand it not simply as the barrier that continues to restrict us from achieving our dreams, but as the doorway of hope upon which to build our future actions.

When I first began to learn about the resilience of my ancestors, I remember a story told to me about Tom Whiteman, my great-grandfather, and other men and women in our community in the 1930s. In a little reserve shack, in the Qu’Appelle Valley, near Jumping Deer Creek, they would prepare for a ceremony, despite the orders from the Indian Agent not to do so. The women would cook, in a tiny kitchen, the food for after the sweat, while the men went under the floorboards where they had built a small sweat lodge. As they held the sacred ceremony, the women pulled a rug over the trapdoor, and sat keeping watch until they finished. The steam and smoke that plumed out when the trapdoor was lifted, was visceral. When I heard the story, I felt simultaneous pride and sorrow; the pride (and gratitude) for such strong ancestors, and the sorrow for having lost the connection to culture in the years following those efforts. White Plume goes on to say:

The pain of that time never really lifted from our people, it just kept passing from one generation to the next. It went on for seven generations, about 110 years, until we realized that we need to cure ourselves; we need to heal and let this pain go. (as cited in Chapman, 2002, p. 57)

Now, even as we long for days of long ago when our languages were intact, and mourn the traditional ways that may never return, it is important to build hope for future generations. The beauty and grace of our cultures of long ago, together with the determination and steadfast belief by our ancestors to hold onto the language and belief systems are threads of hope.

We have lost our old ways, but the principles that we go by are not old; peace is not old, justice is not old, equity is not old, it’s what everybody aspires to. Those are ours...Old is in the mind of the person, old is in their education. We’re contemporary people. I don’t apologize for standing in these clothes today, for that’s what I wear. This is me, this is the Haudenosaunee right now, right here. (Sioui, 1992, p. 36).

In contemporary times, it is possible to look back to the ways of long ago and draw upon the lifeblood of our ancestors to inspire our future. The terrain of education is evolving because of the strength and resilience of our ancestors and those early





leaders who believed that we had something important to contribute, and something invaluable that we could not lose: our land and our languages. These two things continue to be vital to our identities, because our belief systems, our values, and our relationships to everything around us, and our roles and responsibilities are contained within this delicate system.

Through significant shifts and changes in our traditional lifestyles, our languages have survived, and with them the stories and ceremonies, instructions and guides that have allowed the people to adapt, which has not been without tremendous losses. As the old people pass on to Spirit World, we lose important ‘texts’ that guide our understanding of our unique heritages, which define our identities as First Nations. Without the articulation of our identities through our own languages, we filter and distort knowledge that has been transmitted for generations. Further, in translating these knowledge systems from their original languages, we privilege English and enable the false belief that English is a language that can ‘speak’ for us. A deeper exploration of the key aspects of First Nations languages in the Plains that mark them as distinct and unique is beyond the scope of this study; however, there is a body of research that provides greater insight into the complexity of these languages. This research emphasizes the use of language to demonstrate that translations cannot articulate the concepts contained in First Nations’ verb-based language structures, that speak about actions, behaviours and doing, as opposed to the noun-based English that speaks of people, places and things (Edge & McCallum, 2006).

My academic self has been educated in the Western education system, largely from a Western perspective and almost exclusively using Western research. In order to ‘find my way home’ to my Dakota and Saulteaux places, I discovered that I could learn some of this from textbooks, but to really come to know and to deeply understand, I needed to shed the influences of Western education and perspectives. This task has been a difficult one. I am part of a group of people who have been specifically targeted for assimilation, if not outright extermination, for generations. Few of us have emerged unscathed from our common experiences, which have left deep, permanent scars. The most significant loss has been the loss of language.

Why is it so important for us to tell our own story? Ours is not a text-based history, and yet we have survived. First Nations across the Plains have depended on transmission of culture via oral traditions. A significant example of the effect of colonization on the preservation and protection of culture came through the introduction of the Europeans’ “reverence for the written word as the most valid representation of fact. Indigenous oral histories became misrepresented and were dismissed as legends, myths and folklore” (Absolon & Willett, 2004, p. 8). Our country is built upon values that have dismissed oral narratives as too subjective and too personal. This dismissal is convincingly documented by many Indigenous researchers whose own research has revealed the understandings of the texts that tell of our place in history (that which has been written about us) are inherently



flawed. The purpose of history, without giving voice to the people whose stories are told, is an exercise in maintaining power over them, and privileging Western ways of knowing. In this research I am endeavouring to bring the oral traditions of First Nations to power within the structure of Western academia. This exercise, in itself, presents a conflux of two worlds, coming together to create potential positive change in education, which seems impossible but possible, according to Willie Ermine (Cree), who builds on the definition of “ethical space” as coined by Poole in 1972. Ermine applies this understanding to the “entrenched differences of ...two entities... that fragment and interfere with real communication between ...nations... [that requires the creation of a space where ethical dialogue can occur]...This neutral zone is the ethical space where a precarious and fragile window of opportunity exists” (Ermine, 2005) for “critical conversations about democracy, race, gender, nation, freedom, and community” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000, p. 1048).

Elders tell us, they are always here with us, for we live in a Spirit World. This part of our belief system sets us apart from the mainstream worldviews that children experience in schools. As First Nations peoples, we are unique and distinct, as commented by Elder Eva McKay who was interviewed for the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples. There are marked differences between us, and the European cultures that came to settle on this land. We acknowledge “our way of life is so different. These two lives – the Native life and the white life – are different” (Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, 1996), but the task is to search back in our collective memories to discern what can be retained. When we search out the losses, amidst the waves of policy and practice that attempted to assimilate or annihilate us, we illuminate the places to focus our efforts upon: language, gender roles and responsibilities, relationships, ceremonies and traditions. The texts of our history remain on the land, and in our environment, and in the realm of Spirit. Our work is to wind our way back to the openings where this knowledge is accessible, with the understanding that the knowledge is useless if it is not applied and shared to strengthen our relationships.

Indigenous researchers encourage their contemporaries to write, research, and present studies that demonstrate our capability to do so, and in doing so, illuminate areas of research in our communities that could bring about great transformation – not for our communities alone, but as a means to inform current practices that are influenced by dominant Western perspectives and understanding. The benefits of our research will come when we, as Indigenous people, present our worldview as a complement and an alternative way of thinking about the challenges and complexities that exist in education, and in our societies. The challenge between here and there (what exists now, and what we hope will happen in the future) is that educators, and those working in education systems, who are placed in a tension-filled place of not knowing, will emerge, transformed, with a greater awareness and sensitivity that will equip them to structure systems that are truly inclusive and responsive to all children.





Indigenous researchers cite the devaluation of Indigenous knowledge as critical to our ability to influence transformative change in education. Not surprisingly, research of the written texts of those who have written about First Nations history on the Plains revealed critical biases, which privileges a European worldview and understanding. The subtler subtexts reveal a bias against women, children, and the elderly, in favour of men. Without engaging in a conscious exercise to shed my Western influences, I also needed to engage in a process of critical inquiry—to enter into some of these texts, as an interloper, or an investigator seeking clues to the places where misunderstandings stem. There are many questions I began to ask, that my colonized mind never had the consciousness and understanding to ask before. Who is telling this story? How did this person come to know about this? Who are his/her people? What is the purpose of this story? Whose perspectives are influencing this text? These formed some of the questions that cast shadows across the texts I read. At the same time, I learned about my own identity and have a greater understanding of my role and responsibilities.

In a new era of education in Saskatchewan, I recognize a distinct need to embark on research that makes a transition from the traditional forms of Western academic research. To do this, we must endeavour to live in the traditional model set by our ancestors. “Our path must come to create a spiral, one that turns back to the past while at the same time progressing forward in order to survive in a different world” (Fernandez, 2003, p. 254).

As First Nations educators, we carry an additional cultural responsibility into our professional lives. Sometimes our values are at odds with the mainstream and this clash causes internal turmoil. McMaster and Martin remark that “to be an Aboriginal person, to identify with an [I]ndigenous heritage in these late colonial times, requires a life of reflection, critique, persistence and struggle” (as cited in Larocque, 2002, p. 21). With the benefits of our treaty right to education, are the inherent responsibilities. We are at a beautiful time in which we can choose to be assimilated and further colonized, or freed to “use the White man’s tools, if only to see what they have written about us, and then to correct the mistakes...[and begin] to rewrite our own histories” (O’Meara & West, 1996, p. 131)

## **FOCUSING ON THE VOICES OF WOMEN ELDERS BENEATH THE TEXT AND IN THE INTERPRETATION OF TEXT**

What wisdom and advice is found when First Nations women Elders, as keepers of our traditions and cultures, come together in a council process that emphasizes the traditional oral narrative to talk about the implications and responsibilities in preserving and protecting our cultures in Saskatchewan public school systems? In this research, the focus of my narrative inquiry questions was drawn from my reflections on the experiences I have had as a First Nations female educator, in the field of First Nations and Métis education, working with predominantly Euro-

Canadian teachers. In my reflection, it became clear that there was a need for teachers to interact with First Nations people so that their stories and experiences could be shared. In cases where this is not possible, this research offers an opportunity to learn with women Elders. The decision to focus this research project on working with women Elders was developed and shaped through my ongoing reflection on the long-standing silence of First Nations women in decision-making processes. Elders have often described the important role of women in our societies, long ago. The impacts of colonization changed this, and therefore I feel there is a great need for First Nations women Elders to share their knowledge related to traditional education systems, and to be part of a balanced approach to decision-making related to First Nations education in Saskatchewan.

As part of my research, I searched for places where women may have been present, but silenced or ignored by those who wrote the historical texts. One such exploration was of the text written about the treaties in Canada. The text was written by the head treaty negotiator, who acted on behalf of the British crown, Alexander Morris, in 1862.

[It was his desire to] tell the story of these treaties, to preserve, as far as practicable, a record of the negotiations on which they were based, and to present to the many in the Dominion and elsewhere, who take a deep interest in these sons of the forest and the plain, a view of their habits of thought and speech, as thereby presented, and to suggest the possibility, nay, the certainty, of a hopeful future for them. (Morris, 1979, p. 11)

The following presents a poignant example. It takes place as the ancestors of the Treaty Four First Nations met with the Queen's representatives in the Qu'Appelle Valley, in 1874, and illuminates the vast differences in worldviews that joined when the men, representing the Queen, and the men, representing the First Nations, met to negotiate the Qu'Appelle Treaty. The First Nations alluded to their understanding that the Queen's representatives were there on behalf of their Queen. Camped a distance away were our women, the decision-makers, who owned the lodges and the ceremonies, and who were equals to the men. Yet it was only the 'Chiefs and headmen' who were summoned to negotiate on their behalf. The leaders of the First Nations understood that once the paper was signed, it meant that the promises made now had to 'go home' (to the Queen, and to the communities) to be actualized. Men of that era would have recognized and respected the importance of consulting with women, and other older people in the communities. Ka-ha-oo-kus-ka-too (he who walks on four claws) stated to the Lieutenant Governor on the sixth day of negotiation:

It is very good to meet together on a fine day, father. When my father used to bring me anything I used to go and meet him, and when my father had given it to me I gave it to my mother to cook it. When we come to join together one half at least will come (p. 109).

[The Lieutenant Governor had retorted to the men on the previous day]...Why are your Chiefs dumb? They can speak. One of them is called, 'Loud Voice'. He must have been heard in the councils of the nation. Then I ask myself, why do they not answer? It cannot be that you are



afraid; you are not women. (p. 116)



At this critical juncture, the point where the beauty of traditional gender balanced, wholistic governance for community survival and integrity would have come to life is also where it eroded and changed. This is where the significant transformations in our relationships and gender roles and responsibilities began to fall apart. Until that time, despite colonization, but prior to the reserve system, our communities' gender roles and responsibilities were still largely shared as they had been for thousands of years. However, with the aggressive practices of assimilation, came shifts that distorted our way of life, and influenced our men to adopt a male dominant role as presented by the newcomers.

It did not take long before First Nations men became accustomed to the increased power within a patriarchal structure being modelled by their white male contemporaries and soon, decisions were made out of the community circle, and this negation of the voices of women and other recognized leaders, eroded a delicate community balance and structure. Both men and women, especially women, would spend the ensuing generations, struggling under the legacies of colonization, despite the negotiated treaties. Yes, we had a place to remain and live (the reserves, small and often away from our sacred gathering places and traditional hunting territories). Yes, we had education (residential schools, segregated), and yes, we had supposed safety from intrusion (a pass system to keep us confined to the reserve). All the while, ceremonies were banned or outlawed, with no voting rights, no right to self-govern, and artificial constructions of communities that broke down delicate kinship systems. For decades, the lives of First Nations people were overseen by federally appointed Indian Agents; their comings and goings monitored their economic fortune at the mercy and discretion of the government. During this period of identity loss and despair, First Nations were introduced to alcohol, and shown models of patriarchy and violence towards women and children.

Why was it primarily men who were occupying formal positions of leadership? When the treaty parties came to us, the Europeans didn't bring their women, in turn, they didn't want to deal with the women who were the leaders of our families, clans, communities, and Nations. Colonial government policies and laws, including the Indian Act, reinforced political practices that excluded women. This interference ensured that only men carried titles like chief, band councillor and band administrator until very recently. In following these Indian Act practices over the past century, we have internalized the belief that those who carry these titles are the natural leaders of our communities. Many of us know that this is not always true, but public policy and negotiations with government continue to support this system of leadership, and often to the exclusion of women. For these reasons, it has been women who have led the challenge to change discriminatory practices and to look at more responsible leadership processes. (Maracle S. , 2003, pp. 73-4)

“A nation is not conquered until the hearts of its women are on the ground... women have struggled to keep their hearts off the ground by being strong” (Portman & Herring, 2001, p. 1). How long has it been since our women last came together to hold council and talk in a good way about protecting our culture from devastation,

abuse and misappropriation? When do women come together in a sacred way, to honour traditional roles for the preservation of our old ways, this knowledge borne with our Grandmothers, deep within our hearts and our minds, the very essence of our being, overflowing and ready to place into the hearts of a younger generation? The gathering of women is an important aspect of understanding the Indigenous worldview, yet it is difficult, if not impossible, to find examples of their presence in the histories and texts that have been written.

A discussion with the old women of our nations about the roles of women in long-ago times would bring a reminder that, without women no one would exist. Women are the givers of life, and traditionally co-existed in balance with man. We each have our roles and our responsibilities.

The ceremonies were given by the spirit people to women, and women shared them with men. Women's daily roles were quite different from men's, though they were interdependent in all our important tribal ceremonies, women play an equal part with men, and most ceremonies would not take place without women. (Hungry Wolf, 1996, p. 78)

Maria Campbell (Métis/Cree) recalls some of the specific roles of women as the preparation of foods (for everyday, and for ceremony), teaching the children through stories (both day-to-day stories that build character and reinforced identity, and the sacred stories told in winter, the creation stories), the kinship and relationships to "the land and the others around us" (as cited in Smylie & Kaplan-Myrth, 2006, p. 12). The Anishinabe of Cass River, Michigan, where an ancient petroglyph has marked the history of the people for hundreds of years, is the site of an annual symbolic 'Grandmother's Cleansing' ceremony. The petroglyphs are a form of written history, and the stories of the markings on the sandstone are held in oral traditions that talk of the times long ago, including those times when women played an important role in traditional societies. As an example, Elder Sidney Martin explains that the petroglyphs "depict how female and water are united...water is the most precious and sacred gift, and is in fact the lifeblood of Mother Earth. Like Mother Earth, women give and sustain life and it is our responsibility to take care of the water" (as cited in Severn, 2003, p. 3).

Peter Nippi (Nakawe) also reminds us of the life cycle; each progression marked by specific rites of passage. For women, the onset of the menstrual cycle, childbirth, childrearing, menopause, are the markers, and for both men and women our birth and death are common, and understood to be our connections to the Spirit World and the Creator which are carried throughout our life cycles (Nippi, personal communication, January 24, 2008). Each gender has a role to fulfil, but the early years of a child's life (indeed, from the moment of conception) are the responsibility of the woman, and the women in the community, with the old women having a special status as "caretakers of their people... [having] the wisdom of life experiences to know what to do" (Portman & Herring, 2001, p. 185).

These roles and responsibilities are essential components of our way of life that were





eroded through colonization, and these are the places of healing and restoration that we need to bring our communities back into balance. We are from strong and resilient cultures whose reliance on the oral tradition, sound and memory has taught us to remember. By going back to the essence of our traditional ways of knowing and being we will remember. In remembering the fundamental values of long-ago ways, we create hope and the possibility to restore balance and wellbeing to our nations. When the first explorers came to North American from Spain in 1540, they were surprised to find “most impressive Indian societies”...where female leaders held considerable power and influence among their people, which supports oral traditions that tell of time “prior to contact and the influence of the Whites on our culture, women played a prominent role in the social, political and cultural life” of the people (Portman & Herring, 2001, pp. 185-6). As stated by Ouellette, (2002), Ray (1998), Anderson & Lawrence (2003), and Mihesuah (1998) in Portman and Herring (2001),

Women and men often shared equally in social, economic, and ritual roles...women were pivotal to community survival: They controlled material property and food; held positions of political importance, status and power; education children about traditional ceremonies and practices; and taught family history. The continuation of...oral traditions relied on female power. (p. 186)

The resultant loss of women’s voice has created a significant imbalance in our cultures today. Charlene Benz (Anishinabe) recounts with humor and humility:

Traditionally, men have tended to war, politics and business. Caring for the Tribal community was such a significant role, [but] women have always served on council. Native women have more gumption that people realize. We are just a bunch of Grandmothers, but we are also the movers and shakers and keepers who have kept the traditional language and culture alive. (as cited in Severn, 2003, p. 3)

It is vital to restore the voices of women as decision-makers in our communities, in order to determine how to proceed amid the multiplex issues in education. This change is possible because the power is held in our collective cultural blood memory.

[Long ago,] leadership [was] viewed as a shared vision and responsibility...governance is filled not with the romantic notion of male “chiefs” as wise, supreme, all-knowing grandfathers but with tribal councils or committees consisting of multiple leaders (male and female) holding positions of leadership, most often with a group of (elder) women holding the ultimate power for decisions that affect the entire tribe. By necessity leadership is a shared vision. (Portman & Garrett, 2005, p. 284)

Mihesuah (1998) commands my attention in her simple directive: “If writers want to find out what Indian women think they should ask Indian women” (p. 47). The true restoration is not in simply bringing traditional power to women, but to men as well. An important reminder is that “over time through interaction with Euro-Americans and inter-tribal relations, we find that women did have power taken from them, and Indian males did as well” (p. 44).

Culture is dynamic, and First Nations cultural traditions have lived on through the old people, but not without changes. Beverly Hungry Wolf describes her first Sun

Dance, sponsored by her mother, when she was a young woman: “That first time I vowed the Sun Dance I said I would fast for four days. That is the old way. At later Sun Dances they told me I would only have to fast for two days. Things have changed” (Hungry Wolf, 1980, p. 34) and the influences of Western society changed our ceremonies, also:

In mid-August, the month we call “Wasut’u Wi”, or “the month the chokecherries turn black or ripen,” we would pack our old white canvas tent, tent poles, and bedding, cooking pots, and utensils, and old fire grate, two blackened coffeepots, an ax, kindling, firewood, a water bucket, wash basin, and a kerosene lamp into the back of our old and drive forty miles to the annual Sun Dance held on the reservation<sup>4</sup>. We would pack laundry baskets and old suitcases with clothes, along with dishes and eating utensils, and go. “Iglaka,” Mom-mah would say, meaning “taking everything to camp or to move.” We arrived on a Wednesday night and stayed until the following Monday, when we would pack our dirty laundry, tent, and everything we had brought and drive home in the late morning. When we first got there, I would grow excited at the prospect of running free through the camp between the Sun Dance grounds, the carnival, and the rodeo. All three events were held concurrently in the center of the large camp. How difficult it was for me to decide, as a child, which event was more important. (Red Shirt, 1998, p. 61)

The cultural context that defines our identity as First Nations people, and our roles and responsibilities within the community, guides the manner in which we impart values and teachings to the next generation. In First Nations communities, teaching and learning often took place within a highly refined system of kinship and gender roles. Elder Danny Musqua (Saulteaux) recalls this structure within the community in which he grew up:

[Women within our communities were] very strong; they are absolutely equal. We don’t govern our women; my father never did anything without the permission of our mother. When it came to the children, our grandmother’s authority and our mother’s authority was absolute; they make communal law, they make civil law...there were four of them...when you are talking about health, they took care of it. These grandmothers defined the responsibilities of all the members within the community. They distributed food, the making of clothing. When someone was sick, they knew who the doctors were...making it imperative to be confident in self-identity, and knowledge of personal and communal responsibilities, knowing the nation you come from...the future. Try to direct the future of your children. That discipline is in the care of this world we live on. You have to teach that to your children. The teachings begin in the womb. (as cited in Smylie & Kaplan-Myrth, 2006, p. 10)

## THE STORIES THAT SHAPE OUR IDENTITIES: THE ORAL TRADITION

The oral traditions reveal the importance of storytelling as an effective pedagogical strategy, proving the “medium through which children’s theories of the world are constructed. Words are not seen as records but rather as reflections of events. The tradition of telling stories to teach...philosophy, values, beliefs and culture is still practiced” (Cleary & Peacock, 1997, p. 45). Thus, when Western educational theorists discuss the importance of cultural context and its influence on learning, it is not a new philosophy in the worldview of the Indigenous peoples of North America. Indeed, considering the strengths that exist in both Western and First Nations worldviews opens opportunities to create what Ermine (2000) has referred to as the

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<sup>4</sup> In the United States the lands that Native Americans live on is referred to as a “Reservation”. In Canada, we refer to these land bases as “Reserves”.





“ethical space” and to create the culturally responsive environment, which Alaskan academic Demmert (2004) cites as a critical factor in improving academic outcomes for First Nations learners.

Regardless of cultural background, it seems that a common universal understanding exists--that “stories are not just means by which human beings make sense of the world around them...they are also the means by which social change is enacted” (Coulter, Michael, & Poynor, 2007, p. 105).

Stories and songs are teachings. To know our stories and our songs is to understand our place within our community, and in the universe. Many stories have survived through the ages. Their survival is akin to our resilience as First Nations. These spoken word history books “are significant because they are anchors of resistance” (Anderson, 2000, p. 131). The filaments of our stories are, for the most part, still with us today. Their beginnings stretch long into the distance of our ancestors. Luther Standing Bear (Lakota) shares that:

Storytelling is an ancient profession, and these stories are among our oldest possessions. For many years before the white man ever came to our homeland these legends were told over and over, and handed down from generation to generation. They were our books, our literature, and the memories of the storytellers were the leaves upon which they were written. (as cited in Heredia & Francis, 1997)

The drum is the reminder of the heartbeat of the women whose strength keeps the rhythmic continuity of our cultures alive. Traditional pedagogical methods are rooted in the oral tradition and experiential learning. For First Nations children since time immemorial, ‘school’ began each morning when we opened our eyes until we fell asleep each night. At sleep time came another kind of ‘school’, where lessons and insights were presented through dreams. The First Nations lifestyle was woven in delicate balance to include elements of emotional, spiritual, physical and mental strands. The quest for balancing all elements was a daily goal, and not done in isolated, segmented steps and actions. To live as balanced individuals allowed us to contribute to a balanced community. Life was learning; learning was life-long. This wholistic philosophy of being could not allow for one aspect to be removed without a resultant loss of balance in well-being. This belief was true for individual well-being as well as community well-being.

Community teachings were the responsibility of women and their loss directly affects communities being out of balance. The loss of community wellness is seen in “the symptoms of dislocation...evident in high rates of unemployment, suicide, alcoholism, domestic violence, and other social problems, [seriously damaging] the oral means of preserving cultural norms, and the values which prohibit deviant behaviours have been obscured and often forgotten” (retrieved from <http://www.ajic.mb.ca/volumel/chapter13.html#1> on February 4, 2008).

Stillday (Anishinabe) shares the distortion that takes place when ceremonies are not



carried out with the appropriate teachings:

Traditional ceremonies can't be easily understood. Ceremonies are not a prescribed static event, but a living, breathing extension of the people who are participating...the interpretation of Indian ceremonies is too often a one-dimensional representation and only captures a moment in time when tragedy grabs the attention of the outside world. The focus is on what's visible, the ceremony. The deeper spiritual meaning is missed. (2005, ¶ 3).

Today, we struggle to find a balance in restoring this knowledge to young people. Throughout the warm months we hold powwows across Saskatchewan. Both competition and traditional events are held, and for many dancers and singers money influences decisions about which event to attend. Nonetheless, the positive influences of participating in these cultural events outweigh the negative. Feasts and sweat lodges are readily available to young people, in both urban and rural areas. Likewise, there is a great renewal of the Sun Dance, also called the Rain Dance, where young and old alike are learning about the ways of our ancestors. In the Fall and Winter months, Round Dances are held in locations across Saskatchewan, and it is heart-warming to see young men and women attending in high numbers these ceremonial gatherings where alcohol and drugs are forbidden. Increasingly, young men and women are learning the songs and the dances, and making choices to live lifestyles that place cultural identity at the core.

Long ago, participation in sacred ceremonies, such as the sweat lodge, was protected by specific teachings. Conduct and behaviours were taught at an early age, and rules for engagement were often overseen by women in the community. The women were, and continue to be, the glue that binds community together; they are the givers of life, and the nurturers. If the community is not healthy, it is likely that the women are not healthy, or have lost their voice and ability to act upon their traditional roles and responsibilities. If the women are healthy and actively engaged as traditional protectors and preservers of the culture, they will expect their men to become healthy providers and protectors of family and community, the children will be nurtured and guided, and the old people will be respected and cared for. It is imperative to renew the role of women in order for our cultures to survive, and thrive.

## **SUMMARY OF THEMES AND FINDINGS**

Note: The model used in this study is based on a discussion with Peter Nippi, of Kinistin First Nation, who provided me with information and model to illustrate the Saulteaux/Nakawe worldview of the cycle of life (see Figure 1, p. 6). Peter's teachings came from generations before him; his parents, the late Alex and Besigaux, his relatives George, Harry and Jack, Mary Crowe, Charlie Poochay, John Kitty, and Henry Kaye. Describing where information comes from is very important when old people (commonly called "Elders") relay teachings, as it validates the source of their information, and in doing so holds them accountable to be truthful in the manner in which they transmit the teachings to others, (Peter Nippi, personal communication





January 24, 2008 and June 7, 2008)

The Saulteaux/Nakawe framework provides a developmental continuum of wholistic learning, based in Nakawe teachings which is also compatible with the worldviews of other Saskatchewan First Nations, notably the Dakota, Lakota and Plains Cree. This is affirmed in the words of the women interviewed for this research project. From my conversations with Judy Bear, Georgina Musqua and Peter Nippi, as well as others in the First Nations communities I applied this diagram to analyse my research findings. Specifically, I was able to draw themes that contribute to a wholistic learning model with implications for First Nations education in public education systems. The overall framework, themes and accompanying examples are not exhaustive; rather provide an opening for further exploration and dialogue.

**SUGGESTED BEGINNING REFLECTIONS TO CONSIDER WHEN INCLUDING TRADITIONAL KNOWLEDGE IN PUBLIC EDUCATION SYSTEMS**

First Nations women are the keepers of the fires in their communities. The restoration of their voices in decision-making is imperative in public education systems.

Long ago, teaching was done naturally, in the environment. The stones, the plants, the environment and the people in our communities were all teachers.

The moon guides the woman's physical cycle. Women's rites of passage and lifelong roles are connected to the moon cycles. Traditionally, among many First Nations, ceremonies marked specific rites of passage in young boys' and girls' lives. These ceremonies were guided and supported by the community.

In the environment are the indicators that mark the changing cycles of the seasons. These cycles guide our relationships. The concept of community education is rooted in traditional child-rearing practices of First Nations peoples. Traditional practices of education were closely connected to systems designed for community survival and well-being.

Old People (Elders) in First Nations communities are the keepers of knowledge that has been held and carried on for generations, through the oral tradition. Each gender had a specific role; both sexes had responsibilities to contribute to community survival and well-being.

**USING THE MODEL (NIPPI) TO ILLUSTRATE STAGES OF DEVELOPMENT TO DEEPEN STRATEGIES FOR INCLUDING TRADITIONAL KNOWLEDGE IN PUBLIC EDUCATION SYSTEMS**



- Teaching begins with the parents, as soon as it is known a child is coming.
- The child is considered wakan (sacred); a gift from Creator.
- Many teachers emerge to support and guide the parents.
- Newborns are named soon after birth; their Spirit Names (commonly called “Indian names”) provide a foundation for identity. Other ceremonies would be performed, depending on the Nation’s beliefs and customs
- Because of the close connection to Creator in the first years, the child must be protected, nurtured and closely observed.



- Everyone in the community takes responsibility for the child’s instruction and discipline.
- Teaching, long ago, was not disconnected from everyday life – the purpose for education was directly connected to community well-being and survival and infused with the spirituality and traditional beliefs of each Nation.
- Teaching was often done through story-telling, direction instruction or by modelling and guided instruction.
- Values to guide conduct and behaviour within the community were instilled.
- Lessons were provided based on the developmental stage and gender of the child; girls and boys spent much time with the women in the early years.



- Instruction for boys and girls changed when they reached puberty; because of gender-specific roles, boys began apprenticeship with men and girls began to learn women teachings from their mother, aunts, grandmothers, and other members of the community.
- Due to the interwoven nature of teaching and spirituality, learning about the expectations of gendered roles, and the accompanying conduct and behaviours was a major focus.
- Values and beliefs taught from an early age are continued, and many opportunities are available to practice new understandings.
- Teaching at this very active and physical time includes active participation/apprenticeship and skills development with the guidance of adult mentors.





- Adults are not isolated to care for their children alone. The concept of extended family ensured support was available.
- The adult is busy working to contribute to the family/ community survival.
- Skills are practiced and refined based on natural and chosen talents and gifts.
- This is the time of preparing for marriage by reinforcing roles and responsibilities



- As the adult ages, they enter a period of old age where wisdom gained through life experiences, and the refinement of gifts is shared with the young.
- Old people were grandparents to all within the community.
- Old people were greatly respected. Like the young children they are viewed as being close to Creator.
- Women who have reached the end of their moon cycles begin a new spiritual life.
- Ceremonies will be performed at the time of death.

### **SIGNIFICANT IMPACTS AND LOSSES THAT IMPACTED ON EDUCATION SYSTEMS FOR FIRST NATIONS PEOPLES**

Judy Bear's grandmother Mistiskwew taught her about the 'Four Levels of Instruction' (see Figure 10, p. 40) which guides the protection of the transmission of Indigenous Knowledge. All instruction in long-ago times was done in the languages of the First Nations peoples, therefore, the resulting loss of language means there has also been loss or distortions of the context of the teachings.

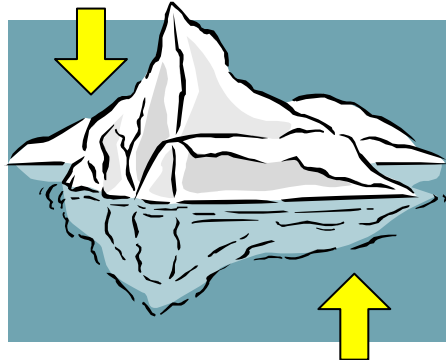
Judy Bear describes the four levels of instruction in the Cree language. Her English translation is included, however, full detail of the third and fourth levels are not fully articulated in English as teachings at these levels require tobacco protocols. Providing tobacco requires a deep understanding of the meaning of the protocol and in knowing the purpose for seeking such information. Judy Bear reminds us that "caution [must be taken] not to overstep the Creator's boundaries" (Bear, 1977).

Both Judy Bear and Georgina Musqua refer to the teachings as coming through the language. Due to the impacts of colonization on First Nations peoples, and the resulting loss of language, much has been lost. Further erosion of the deep meanings of the teachings occurs through translation. An appropriate analogy is the iceberg; whereby surface level teachings and what is obvious are at the surface, however, below the surface is the deep knowledge and understanding of the complexity of the teachings, which can only be learned through engagement with traditional knowledge keepers whose language is intact and who practice traditional lifestyles.

## UNDERSTANDING THE FOUR LEVELS OF INSTRUCTION (BEAR) TO INTRODUCE TRADITIONAL KNOWLEDGE IN PUBLIC EDUCATION SYSTEMS

**First Level Cultural Teachings:** First, validate information and then teach accompanying life skills and values. Involve other ‘teachers’.

**Second Level Cultural Teachings:** Observe the learner and check for understanding. Provide additional details based on inquiries.



**Third Level Cultural Teachings:** This requires a cistemaw offering (tobacco). Spiritual beliefs are verbally addressed by Old People (respected Elders) in the community.

**Fourth Level Cultural Teachings:** At this level participation is necessary. It is experiential. Old people provide hands-on instruction to those who approach with an offering of tobacco requesting help.

The bear is both a healer and a protector. I was once told that if I wanted to know about medicines or about parenting, I should watch the bear. Both Judy Bear and Georgina Musqua are named after the bear. Both women talk about the importance of our names in establishing our identities and in connecting ourselves to the past and future. These teachings about kinship are a significant loss for today’s generation, who struggle to find a sense of belonging. Without an understanding of who they are, and where they come from, it is very difficult for young people to be grounded and balanced enough to move successfully ahead in a contemporary world.

Finally, when there is a need to move beyond Level 1 and 2 teachings, teachers must understand the importance of involving Elders and cultural knowledge keepers. Knowing the local protocols is only possible by interacting with First Nations peoples, and in building respectful relationships for the benefit of a future generation of young people.

“Maybe people will say a lot of the things that were done by the Old People maybe that’s too hard or too long, but it’s meaningful. And it will be meaningful for other people to be able to learn that way. It’s a long way, but it’s still meaningful.” (Judy Bear, 2008)





## CONCLUDING THOUGHTS: COMPLETING THE CIRCLE

Public education can certainly not be responsible for the deep level teachings that Judy Bear and Georgina Musqua talk about; however, there is great opportunity to provide relevant and responsive education that will support all students in a greater awareness of the cultures, histories and worldviews of First Nations peoples in Saskatchewan. This is particularly important for First Nations students, who will be supported through affirmation of their identities, and in connecting to traditional teachings.

Below are some examples discussed by Judy Bear and Georgina Musqua throughout the study. These represent examples of Level 1 and 2 Cultural Teachings (p. 84) that could be explored in public schools:

Public education systems can work toward helping students:

- Understand the history of Saskatchewan, inclusive of the realities and experiences of First Nations peoples;
- Recognize the impacts and legacy left by colonization, on First Nations peoples;
- Know the unique language groups within the First Nations, where they are located and aspects of their distinctiveness;
- Explore and make connections between the values of First Nations peoples and other cultural groups; and,
- Commit to principles of respectful human interactions, based on human rights and justice.

Judy Bear and Georgina Musqua also talk about some of the teaching that require tobacco offerings. These are the Level 3 and 4 Cultural Teachings (p. 84) and should be done only with the guidance of an Elder, or a knowledgeable traditional person. Teaching need not be at the deep spiritual levels; rather educators can help all students by:

- Acknowledging that First Nations peoples' traditional worldviews, customs and beliefs are infused with spirituality;
- Understanding that learners may, or may not have strong connections to their First Nations identities, depending on the impacts of colonization in their family/community, and despite this require education that affirms and builds a healthy self-identity;
- Recognizing that biases in history that have contributed to the development of stereotypes and misconceptions about First Nations peoples;

- Expanding research to formulate background information to teach history inclusive of the realities and experiences of First Nations peoples, with the recognition that information may be located within the oral traditions and history of the people;
- Developing strategies that are modelled on traditional teaching strategies that reinforce relevant and responsive lessons, such as guided practice, oral history, languages instruction, story-telling, direct instruction and lecturing, mentoring, discussing/talking, inquiry learning, experiential learning;
- Teaching common values that cross cultural boundaries – respect, humility, generosity, equality, perseverance, courage, gratitude, love and caring;
- Honouring the significance of the rites of passage of young people, in early childhood, youth and into adulthood;
- Emphasizing opportunities to explore traditional worldviews, such as sustainability, interdependence and interconnectedness, contributions of Indigenous knowledge, conduct and behaviours for individuals to live in harmony with their environment; and,
- Welcoming other teachers to support you – parents, Elders and knowledge keepers, community members, and colleagues.



## **THE JOURNEY OF AN INDIGENOUS RESEARCHER: WHAT DID I LEARN?**

The women I worked with affirmed my sense that I have been guided toward this work throughout my whole life. It is part of my blood memory, to be connected to my cultural identity in a way that helps me share my gifts with others. As I look back at my journey through education and life, I recognize my own resiliency in forging ahead and striving to succeed. I have gained both Western and Indigenous knowledge, despite the interruptions and disconnections in my life. For a period of time, I lost hope in my ability to succeed. For many years, I did not see any role models who reflected my cultural identity. The stereotypes about my people were reinforced and my own internalization began to emanate as shame. In retrospect, I look back at these dark times and acknowledge the important teaching: The ancestors are always with you, helping you and guiding you.

After meeting the Elders and teachers at the Saskatchewan Indian Federated College in my late twenties I was finally guided to a place where I could learn with and from Elders. Learning about my people for the first time, in a positive and wholistic way, was transformational. These early experiences with Elders, and all of my subsequent experiences learning through ceremonies and in classrooms, are combined within me. My greatest challenge is to find ways to balance the best of both the Indigenous ways of knowing and Western knowledge so that I can transfer this understanding into my personal and professional lives.



There were many times when I questioned the incongruence in the education systems, regarding First Nations education. In seeking answers, it became evident that these are issues that others would also like to know more about:

- There is a general, notable absence of First Nations women Elders' voices in the literature. Specifically, discussions about the roles of women in decision-making about important issues relevant to community survival and well-being are needed.
- There is an alarming loss of language for all First Nations, and it is critical to discuss what implications this has on the transmission of cultural teachings, and the protection and preservation of cultures.
- There are symbols and terms that have emerged in contemporary society, such as 'Medicine Wheel' and 'circle of life' and 'Elder'. These have been used to make sense of First Nations cultures, by combining ideas and values together. Discussion is needed on how to ensure these symbols do not further trivialize and denigrate cultures.
- There is much to be gained when we engage in dialogues that help us to talk about our own unique worldviews. These discussions are needed as building blocks to strengthened relationships among Peoples. This is fundamental in traditional practices that emphasized community well-being.
- There is a need to tap into the untold richness contained within the stories of our ancestors, particularly when they are told in the First Nations languages. With the technology advances, there are many innovative ways to preserve these stories for the benefit of future generations.
- There is a need to ask questions and to challenge others, respectfully, with solutions and alternatives so that our voices are not lost forever.

My closing reflection is to share a cautious hopefulness for the children of our future. Despite great changes in education, there is still much left for us to explore. If we are able to collectively explore and discuss the problems and the potential solutions, there is greater hope. I want to be part of the discussion. I would like First Nations women to be present in these discussions. I hope that many other First Nations will also join in the discussion. The ancestors will gather there with us.



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