

DECOLONIZING MI'KMAW* EDUCATION THROUGH CULTURAL PRACTICAL KNOWLEDGE

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ABSTRACT. This article shares the stories of three Mi'kmaw teachers who are bringing their Aboriginal cultural practical knowledge into the school landscape through pedagogy and relationality, as they work towards the decolonization of their education system. Our notion of cultural practical knowledge relates to Connelly & Clandinin's personal practical knowledge. It is connected to the Mi'kmaw stories these teachers and their students construct and re-construct together as they work towards understanding and supporting the needs of students through applying teachers' own cultural practical knowledge.

DÉCOLONISATION DE L'ÉDUCATION MI'KMAQ PAR LA CONNAISSANCE PRATIQUE CULTURELLE

RÉSUMÉ. Cet article relate l'histoire de trois professeurs mi'kmaw qui mettent à contribution leurs connaissances pratiques culturelles autochtones dans le paysage scolaire par la pédagogie et la relationalité, tandis qu'ils s'évertuent à décoloniser leur système d'éducation. Notre notion de la connaissance pratique culturelle se rapporte à la connaissance pratique personnelle de Connelly et Clandinin. Elle est liée aux récits mi'kmaw que ces enseignants et leurs élèves construisent et reconstruisent ensemble afin de comprendre et de répondre aux besoins des élèves grâce à l'application des connaissances pratiques culturelles des enseignants.

When we do not change the basis of the education of Native people, the process started by residential school will still continue. (J. Hookimaw-Witt, 1998, p. 160)

Euro-Canadians have been making decisions about the education of Aboriginal peoples for some considerable time. With these decisions has come an education system that is based on knowledge and values which are usually more European than Aboriginal (Ryan, 1996; Battiste, 1999). This condition is common in a range of educational situations involving racial and ethnic minorities. According to John Ogbu, European dominance of

* Throughout this article the authors are applying the usage of Mi'kmaq and Mi'kmaw as adopted by the working committee of the Atlantic Canada Mi'kmaw/Miigmao Second Language Document (2002). Mi'kmaq/Mi'kmaw are Smith Francis orthography. Mi'kmaw is used as an adjective. Mi'kmaq is used as a noun and can be singular or plural.

schooling means that, "explanation of the school adjustment and academic performance problems of the minorities are based on a white middle-class cultural model, not the cultural model of the minorities which influence the latter's school orientations and behaviors" (1989, p. 201). But what if the teachers of minority children were not of European descent? What if the worldview of those teaching in an Aboriginal school system was based more on Aboriginal than European ways? What would such a school environment and teacher identity look like?

The difficult journey towards decolonization of Aboriginal education

We want education to provide the setting in which our children can develop the fundamental attitudes and values which have an honored place in Indian tradition and culture. We want the behavior of our children to be shaped by those values which are most esteemed in our culture. (National Indian Brotherhood, 1972, p. 2)

Since the 1969 federal White Paper, which advocated that the provinces take control of Aboriginal affairs, Aboriginal organizations have increasingly mobilized in collective opposition to the centralizing hegemony of Canadian governments, and have strived to regain control of the education of their children. A central policy pillar in this movement was the National Indian Brotherhood's (NIB) *Indian Control of Indian Education*, (1972) which advocated participation by Aboriginal peoples in the movement towards local control and jurisdiction over education. As Abele, Dittburner, and Graham (2000) tell us, however, the problem of how to define control has been muddled and elusive. While the NIB document spells out a range of areas through which Aboriginal parents and communities can be more fully involved in the education of their children, the education of Aboriginal children still tends to be characterized more by the ways of the dominant white society. The majority of teachers has little to no experience with, and understanding of, the cultural practices of the students they teach; the majority of teachers in Aboriginal schools are white and monocultural. Multicultural teacher educators have shown the limitations which are placed upon the education of minorities by these teachers if they do not overcome the low expectations, limited understanding of family contexts, and cultural ignorance they often have for minority students (Finney & Orr, 1995; Florio-Ruane, 2001; Fuller, 1994; Ladson-Billings, 2001; 1995; Sleeter, 1992; 1993).

So despite the fact that Aboriginal peoples may have governance over their own schools, taking control of their schools has not been easy. In many if not most North American schools where Aboriginal students attend, the hidden agenda is still inherently based on "Anglo" or "Franco" language and culture, and serves to assimilate and homogenize students in non-Aboriginal values and knowledge (Tippeconnic III, 2000; Battiste, 1999). While Aboriginal control of education is arguably the most important dimension

of schooling for First Nations' peoples, we suggest that the focus on governance – without ensuring that teachers are supportive and respectful of Aboriginal students – will not achieve the desired ends set out by the NIB.

Numerous studies have laid out an agenda of change for Aboriginal education in Canada (Battiste & Barman, 1995, Battiste, 1999), and the United States (Tippeconnic, 2000), and other parts of the Aboriginal world (Nee-Benham & Cooper, 2000). Only a few studies have accounted for this change agenda at the school and classroom level through the voices and stories of First Nations educators in Canada (Orr & Friesen, 1999; Goulet, 2001; Ward & Bouvier, 2001), the United States (Cleary & Peacock, 1998), and New Zealand (Smith, 2000). More detailed examinations of First Nations schools which are addressing fundamental educational changes at the classroom level need to be undertaken in Canada. Ryan (1996) suggests that an education system that is respectful of – and responsive to – Aboriginal peoples' needs must address the political jurisdictional aspects of education, such as the evaluation and reporting system. Such a system must also contain cultural values, such as are passed on through Aboriginal languages and discipline, and content knowledge. We believe that Mi'kmaw teachers who are bringing their Aboriginal cultural practical knowledge onto the school landscape through pedagogy and relationality are a necessary part of the decolonization of Mi'kmaw education.

Decolonization through Aboriginal 'cultural practical knowledge'

Aboriginal people need a new story. . . . But Aboriginal people recognize that they are in between stories. We do not trust the old story of government paternalism and we are trying to get a clearer picture of our new story. Ultimately, this new story is about empowering Aboriginal worldviews, languages, knowledge, cultures, and most important, Aboriginal peoples and communities. (Battiste, 2000, In Castellano, Davis, and Lahache, p. viii)

The Assembly of First Nations (1988) argues that an Aboriginal educational system must place Aboriginal cultural values and linguistic knowledge at the center of schooling. This would make it more likely that schooling would be made to fit around an Aboriginal cultural ethos, rather than fitting culture into schooling. Hookimaw-Witt (1997), Watt-Cloutier (2000), and Battiste (1999) echo this sentiment and call for a form of schooling that is centered upon Aboriginal languages, knowledge, and worldviews. In this article we look to three Aboriginal teachers who are successfully living out the decolonization process in the classroom by documenting the “new story” they are living as they bring their cultural knowledge onto the school landscape.

Many educators agree that honoring of Aboriginal cultural knowledge is one of the most significant ways schools can be more responsive to Aboriginal students' needs (Kawagley, 1995; Ryan, 1996; Battiste, 1999; Graveline,

1998; Hookimaw-Witt, 1998; Lipka, Mohatt & the Ciulistet Group, 1998; Castellano, Davis, & Lahache, 2000; Nee-Benham & Cooper, 2000; Stairs, 1995). Educational anthropologists have been interested in how teachers attempt "to match their teaching styles to the culture and home background of their students" (Ladson-Billings, 2001, p. 75). As Erickson and Mohatt (1982) tell us, "It may well be, by discovering the small differences in social relations which make a big difference in the interactional ways . . . [that] making small changes in everyday participation structures may be one of the means by which more culturally responsive pedagogy can be developed" (1982, p.170).

Yet we need to ask ourselves what is this cultural responsiveness in today's Aboriginal societies. What cultural knowledge do teachers of Aboriginal students possess? We know that how teachers meaningfully relate to and connect with their students has a great deal to do with appropriate, caring teaching in general (Huber, 1999; Noddings, 1992). For minority students, caring calls for a particular focus on cultural solidarity and understanding that comes through a sustained presence in, understanding of, and commitment to the cultural context in which these students live (Ladson-Billings, 2002). There is much still to learn about the place of cultural knowledge in schooling. We need to continue to uncover ways that teachers use their cultural knowledge in relation to and in support of minority students. Two of us are experienced Mi'kmaw educators positioned as a teacher and a system-wide administrator in a Mi'kmaw education system, and the other is a non-Aboriginal scholar positioned in a university who has had a longstanding commitment to research and practice with First Nations communities. Despite our different locations we share a common desire to understand and support the work of Aboriginal teachers who are attempting to express their cultural knowing on behalf of students inside institutions that may continue to be dominated by non-Aboriginal power structures.

The work of Ladson-Billings (1995) and Delpit (2002), as well as our own stories of research and practice in Mi'kmaw education, helps us build a case for the exploration of cultural dimensions of teaching in classrooms. Ladson-Billings (1995) sees teachers' work as part of a project to teach knowledge to students through a "culturally relevant pedagogy" that promotes academic achievement, cultural competence, and socio-political consciousness. Cultural competence is a way for teachers to help students live bi-culturally between home and school cultures, by developing a greater understanding of, and respect for, their culture of origin. Lisa Delpit (2002) also sees cultural knowledge as a process of being respectful of home cultures, and urges educators to help make children "feel welcomed and invited by allowing their interests, culture, and history into the classroom" (p. 48). For us then, cultural knowledge is connected to the Mi'kmaw cultural stories these

teachers and their students construct and re-construct together in classrooms in honor of home, community, and Mi'kmaw National knowledge.

We link our understanding of Mi'kmaw teachers' cultural knowledge, and pedagogy to Connelly & Clandinin's (1988) notion of personal practical knowledge, in order to show how we see cultural knowledge as being lived and embodied in the stories and practices of Aboriginal teachers.

Personal practical knowledge is in the teacher's past experience, in the teacher's present mind and body, and in the future plans and actions. . . . It is for any teacher a particular way of reconstructing the past and the intentions of the future to deal with the exigencies of a present situation. (p. 25)

We infuse Connelly and Clandinin's notion of the personal with the cultural in 'personal practical knowledge' because we see the teacher knowledge of these three Mi'kmaw educators as being distinctively cultural knowing. We see their teacher knowing as inseparable from their community and wider Mi'kmaw Nation which has educated them as part of a collective to work against assimilation; prepared them to support the affirmation and validation of Mi'kmaw language and identity given to them by their elders and families. Their particular Mi'kmaw Indigenous teacher knowledge, therefore, is connected to an educational responsibility to serve as cultural workers in opposition to the social forces that threaten to erode their own and their students' Aboriginal identities.

We show how these Mi'kmaw educators' teacher knowledge is shaped by the personal and social experiences they have encountered, past and present, in relation to their Mi'kmaw culture. In their particular narrative life histories, these teachers' Mi'kmaw cultural identities have been discredited, marginalized, and silenced, as well as strengthened and affirmed. How do their narrative life histories give expression to their cultural practical knowledge? How has cultural practical knowledge of these Mi'kmaw teachers been shaped by the stories they have lived in opposition to white hegemony and assimilation? How does their cultural practical knowledge, rooted in memories of past stories, shape these teachers' current practices at the same time as the teachers in turn shape their school landscapes (Clandinin & Connelly, 1995; Cole & Knowles, 2001)?

Narrative life history as a decolonizing methodology

The research agenda [of indigenous peoples] is conceptualized here as constituting a programme and set of approaches that are situated within the decolonizing politics of the indigenous peoples' movement . . . It necessarily involves the processes of transformation, of decolonization, of healing and of mobilization as peoples. (Tuhivai Smith, 1999, pp. 115-116)

Our work, rooted in narrative life history, has a political orientation that attempts to understand dimensions of self-determination (Orr & Friesen, 1999) in the postcolonial-colonial tensions of First Nations education in rural Nova Scotia. We use a decolonizing orientation (Tuhiwai Smith, 1999) to frame our analysis as we seek to account for the struggles and triumphs of Mi'kmaw educators as they negotiate their place in their own school system through the expression of their distinctive cultural practical knowledge.

With Aboriginal educators such as Ilutsik (1994), Cleary and Peacock (1997), Horne and McBeth (1998), Lipka, Mohatt and the Ciulistet Group (1998), and Nee-Benham and Cooper (2000), we believe stories are central to Aboriginal knowing (Orr, 2001). As "self-examined lives made public, stories . . . allow the teller's voice to be heard" (Horne & McBeth, 1998) and enable the personal significance of these stories to the teller to be a priority (Connelly & Clandinin, 1999). Moreover, narrative life histories provide a contextual understanding to complex events and phenomena that help academics and policy workers to more accurately represent and give legitimacy to the knowledge of people who have often been silenced and marginalized in academic and professional discourse (Connelly & Clandinin, 1999).

Three Mi'kmaw educators will be profiled. These educators are working in several Mi'kmaw schools in Nova Scotia, attempting to decolonize their education system through their use of Aboriginal cultural practical knowledge. Participants were engaged in conversational interviews (Orr & Friesen, 1999; Orr, 2001) about perceptions of their life and work in education. Key issues that were explored related to ways and reasons why participants felt they were or were not able to engage in successful educational practices that supported their Mi'kmaw students, what autobiographical and contextual factors shape(d) their practice and teacher identities, and their visions and hopes for the education of their people. Participants usually participated in two taped conversational interview sessions. In addition, participants were part of many informal conversations as part of the researchers' professional work within Mi'kmaw communities. We describe ways these educators worked to create appropriate educational experiences for their students which consider their understanding of children's lives on and off the school landscape (Connelly & Clandinin, 1999).

The three women whose stories follow are all trailblazers in the decolonization movement. One is a veteran elementary Mi'kmaw teacher who is part of the first generation of Aboriginal teachers in this elementary context. The other two teachers are very new teachers who have begun the trailblazing in a high school context that is only now emerging under Mi'kmaw jurisdiction. Collectively, their stories show a range of cultural challenges they

faced and continue to face as they work to understand the cultural needs of their students and to apply their own cultural practical knowledge to support them. These teachers are re-storying the school landscape as a place that addresses the inadequacies and pains of their own schooling, and addresses their students' needs in the face of poverty, identity dislocation, and colonialism. The stories show that progress towards decolonization has been made because of the infusion of these teachers' cultural practical knowledge into schools. Although some individuals may see relationality as an integral part of pedagogy, in our notion of cultural practical knowledge that follows, we explore relationality as a separate entity in order to highlight the centrality of both relationship building and school cultural pedagogical knowledge in Mi'kmaw education. These three Mi'kmaw teachers' cultural practical knowledge as expressed through their stories of caring and relationality and Mi'kmaw pedagogical ways are presented in the following two sections.

MI'KMAW TEACHERS' CULTURAL PRACTICAL KNOWLEDGE HONORS INDIGENOUS KNOWLEDGE AND PEDAGOGY

Freda's Mi'kmaw Pedagogy:
"I tell my students stories about when we were small."

My father taught us through hands-on learning. He kept a gun behind the TV and we never touched it. That was our livelihood so all fourteen of us knew never to go near it. And we had a big wood stove, and my father would make us feel the heat so we wouldn't go near it, and then we would teach the little ones that way. It was a big stove, and even though there were always kids running around, no one ever got burned. We respected him and he taught us better. My mother was the boss and she gave us all our chores to do, and there was never any fighting. My job would be to sweep and wash the bathroom, and there were no arguments. And now I do the same as my Mom in my class too; everybody has a part to play.

In teaching, I try to remember what I was taught. I tell my students stories about when we were small and how we were told to respect our elders. I'm hoping some of these little things will sink in. My grandfather used to do the same thing to me. I remember him sitting there telling some little story about an animal, and when I think back, he was trying to teach us something. I spent a lot of time with him because he lived right beside us. My dad respected him and told us not to go near him, so I used to be scared of him at first. He'd tell us to always walk behind him, and not to let ourselves be seen. I can remember couples would go in because they wanted to get married, and I would listen to my grandfather, and what he would tell them.

In the curriculum, we don't learn enough of our own stuff. There's not enough culture or native studies, it's just their stuff, and the kids end up thinking Indians are bad.

I find that there are only a few of us now that really understand the language and the culture, and I find that our language is in the back seat somewhere. It has to get out first, and our people need to realize that we are lost here when we don't know about the culture and the language. To be an Indian, there has to be a wanting. I try to use my language in the classroom, but there's so much stuff going on. I have only four students who can speak Mi'kmaq, so I feel like I'm catering to the English language first. But at home, everything is Mi'kmaq. When you walk in, I have a sign on the door which asks you to speak in Mi'kmaq. I'm trying as hard as I can to encourage these kids, and to encourage everybody. A couple of years ago, I used to get mad at them and ask them to stop speaking English, but that doesn't work. We need to find another way to save the language, and so I try to ignore the English and listen to the kids who are speaking Mi'kmaq to encourage them.

You have to feel the language in your heart: what good is it for me to do something that I don't want to do? When I'm doing attendance, they'll say, 'Here' in Mi'kmaq. At first they had a hard time with it, and then finally, no one laughed and they got it. If they want to leave the room for something, they have to ask in Mi'kmaq. It has to be encouraged in the home. The residential schools beat the Mi'kmaq out of us, and it's about time that someone put it back. Schools should treat their kids right and be a happy place where they want to go. Instead, all they hear is, 'Get in line!' and 'Sit down!' If you are walking with your kids and they're laughing, someone says, 'Oh my gosh, she can't even keep her kids in a straight line.' To me, kids talking and making noise is learning. Sometimes if I want to work individually with one person, I'll pair the other students up and ask them to try and learn together. They're learning how to help each other, and that's the Mi'kmaq way.

Doris's Mi'kmaw pedagogy:
"My desks are structured in circles. I refuse to have them in lines."

I remember when I was in kindergarten, my mother said, 'You are doing great in that class.' I passed and then I got to primary, and I failed primary. I said, 'How can anybody fail primary, Mom?' She said that I didn't fail, but I was put back, because I refused to talk in class. Then, when I got to university, I started thinking about it. Now I think I know why I didn't talk: the teacher was non-native. I didn't feel comfortable speaking the English language until I was 5 or 6 years old, maybe 7, and my own sister refused to speak English to anyone until she was in grade 10. I have one student here who refuses to speak English also, she just speaks Mi'kmaq. Isn't that strange?

My high school experience wasn't very pleasant. The first year that I went to a provincial school I skipped class every single day. Some students purposely would leave me out of things right in front of the teacher, but the teacher never said anything. In fact, he or she would usually throw us out. Every time something went missing from a teacher's desk, all of the native students would be called down to the principal's office. I just wanted to get the hell out of there.

The first year I was here there were no resources whatsoever. I spent that whole first year every night working on lesson plans. I spent numerous hours looking for books with native content. It's only been within the last two years that we've gotten 'Medicine River.' I teach books and plays with native content, even

though they aren't on the approved list. We did Thompson Highway's plays and the kids loved them, they absolutely loved them. They identify with them and they see it as part of their culture, because the writer is native. When we talked about the Holocaust, I explained to my students that thousands and thousands of native people also died because of genocide, but it isn't as publicly known. They were surprised at this, and so I brought in a book called 'Through Indian Eyes,' which told about the conflicts between the government and native peoples. The students couldn't believe that this stuff had happened, and that they weren't taught at an earlier grade.

Native students tend to work better in groups, so I try to use as much group work as possible. Other teachers say, 'What about staying on task?' Well, I don't sit behind my desk the whole time, and I don't stand in front of the board the whole time. If we finish a chapter, I have a few minutes to go over questions that are on the board. I just go from group to group and ask them, 'What have you done, what have you thought about, how are you doing?' And then I go in front of the class and together as a class we answer these questions, and I find that they understand instead of me interpreting for them. In their groups they will make their own short stories; I give them the task of constructing their own thesis questions, or I give them open-ended questions. They also write tests in their groups, they work together to try and solve the questions, rather than have them go home and study for hours and hours on recall. I want them to think critically. If I could do this for exams, I would. But for the tests in my classroom, that's what I do, and they say, 'Miss, we're the only ones who have group tests.'

I'm teaching my English students to write essays. Rather than start on the introduction first; I start with the body of the essay, because they are holistic thinkers. It takes them forever to start the introduction, so I said that we'd start with the body, then do the conclusion, and then do the introduction last. It was taking them almost an hour just to think about what to write in the introduction, and then they would lose their focus. They are not linear thinkers; they jump from one subject to the next. So work on a topic first, and break it down, to see what the topic consists of. Then I have them write a paragraph for each, finding books or the internet to back up what they're saying. They find it easier to write that way. I had one student come up to me yesterday, and it made my day. He said, 'Miss, jeez I'm glad I had you as an English teacher. At first I hated writing essays, I hated them with a passion. But now I can write a thousand word essay, just like that. No problem.' And some of the other teachers are doing the same thing now. One of my colleagues used to bang his head against the wall trying to get them to understand how to write essays. And now he says it's working fantastically. But I found with the students, they just couldn't keep their focus. So I tried it on a few students first, just to see how they would do and it worked, so I just started doing it in the classroom, and I find it works even better.

I never expected it would be like this. I knew I would not teach in a traditional way, always standing in front of the board, and me just talking and the students listening. I find that so boring and I would never impose that on the students, because there are numerous times when I fell asleep myself in classes. This is why my desks are structured in circles. I refuse to have them in lines. I like walking around the class, working with the class, rather than just standing in front there and teaching. A lot of teachers ask me, 'Don't you find this difficult

because of the student's talking?' No, I want my students talking – that's the point!

Nicole's Mi'kmaw pedagogy:

"I've seen science, I've seen culture, and I've seen the two of them connect."

My upbringing showed me culturally relevant science. I've seen science, I've seen culture, and I've seen the two of them connect. My father introduced science to me. A lot of times he would take me up on the skidoo and we would go trapping. He was a trapper and so he would catch muskrat and other animals, and he would point things out to me: the tracks and what they were a sign of, whether the ground was hard or soft, the trees. He knew all about the hunting environment in the woods and he taught me that. And when he would bring home the muskrat for him to skin, he taught me how to, so I learned about the organs, the digestive system, and all that. We couldn't have any waste, so my father would remove the organs, boil them, and feed them to the dogs; we wouldn't waste anything. So this kind of got me interested in science a lot, and I was exposed to it when I went fishing with him. He would take me out in the woods and we would fetch wood splints for my grandmother to make baskets, and we would get tips to make wreaths.

When I was growing up there were a lot of things I learned from my father. It wasn't pointed out as science, it was pointed out as a way of living, and it was a way I had to learn. He would send me to go get blueberries and he told me about conservation. He would tell me they wouldn't all be ripe yet, and not to take them all. He'd say, 'Don't try to get all the blueberries, this is not a competition with your sisters.' So, he taught us values in this way.

When I teach kids nowadays, they think that science and culture are isolated, that they can't be merged and that you can only learn one without the other. But I try to point out that science and culture are interconnected, no matter how much people want to separate them. And I want to show them that science has always existed within the Mi'kmaq community; it wasn't introduced by Europeans or the white man. I try to point out that science has always been with us in different forms, in medicine, fishing or in terms of navigation using star charts. It's always been there in terms of the ocean, the forest and the atmosphere. Science is culturally relevant, and vice versa: you can't separate the two.

The perfect example of how the scientific method can be applied to culture is in traditional medicine. A student took three native medicine roots and boiled them to make a tonic, and then we grew some bacteria. She knew these three plants were a form of antibiotic, but she wanted to know the extent to which they would inhibit the growth of the bacteria, and I helped her do some experiments. When we had finished, we displayed the project in my classroom as a means to explain to students that the scientific method was existent in times prior to contact. Science was inherent in our culture: we used trial and error, and made observations and conclusions.

I try to make science and math natural, so that it's part of their lives. It's who they are; they have math and science all around them, they just have to see it. It has to be hands-on, because I find they have a hard time dealing with abstract learning. It's something they have to see and feel, it has to be visible. I try to

use examples from their lives, from their communities, their culture, their history. For example, integers and card games go together. Students have a hard time understanding integers, like how can something be negative? Either you have it, or you don't; they couldn't make the connection with the negative. So I brought in some cards and we played with them, and whenever they went in the hole, they put a negative sign in front of it. After we play some rounds, I point out that what they were doing was integers. Once they make the connection it becomes easy, because now they use the context of playing cards with the integers.

I find that using both languages in the classroom makes a big difference with the kids. It makes it friendlier and they aren't as intimidated. They can give the answer in Mi'kmaq if they want to, or maybe the concept is easier to understand in our language. If they know they can use Mi'kmaq, it makes the math classroom more math friendly. If I'm just using English, I may lose them at the beginning of the class. There's no debating about which language to use. It comes naturally because I know they are all speakers. And the language isn't the one on trial; we learn math through the language. English can be a barrier, because they feel like they are being evaluated on their English. The Mi'kmaq language is not as structured, so they feel freer. If their answers are wrong in English, it's two strikes against them, and their self-esteem drops. If it's wrong in Mi'kmaq, it's only one. So, it's less threatening for them. If we talk in Mi'kmaq, they are more motivated to learn. I find it helps the kids to open up; it takes down this barrier and gives the class a sense of community and family.

CULTURAL PRACTICAL KNOWLEDGE AS SHAPED BY PAST AND PRESENT STORIES OF INDIGENOUS PEDAGOGY

All three of these women understand and value images of their Mi'kmaw culture that are remembered from past stories in their pedagogical approaches. Freda represents an example of a first generation Mi'kmaw educator seeking to continually validate her students' Mi'kmaw identity through strong connections to their own family stories of Mi'kmaw values. Her use of Mi'kmaw language and the teaching of cultural values are done in spite of their waning presence in the lives of many of these children. This shows her commitment to keeping focused on cultural knowledge of the past generation, while recognizing that the social context is eroding and changing the ways these cultural values and language find expression.

Freda tells stories to her elementary students that convey the Mi'kmaw values of respect that were told to her in her youth. Her passion for teaching Mi'kmaw culture is lived out in her classroom as she models and then has her students practice values of respect and collective responsibility. She knows her students' use of their Mi'kmaw language is closely related to their identity as Aboriginal peoples and she encourages even the most fledgling speakers to use their ancestral language as part of their classroom experiences.

The two high school teachers, Doris and Nicole, are also living Mi'kmaw cultural practical knowledge in their pedagogical work in classrooms that is connected to their own family and childhood stories. Both of these secondary teachers place Aboriginal cultural knowledge at the center of their pedagogy. Aboriginal knowledge is not a part of the official curriculum, yet these teachers center their content knowledge around their beliefs about Aboriginal cultural identity that come from their own experiences as learners and teachers navigating the complexities of school institutions. They are able to live comfortably between ways of the past that are less known to their students, and their students' experiences with contemporary cultural ways. Their pedagogy is rooted in their own learning experiences as Mi'kmaw that are usually holistic, collaborative, and communitarian. They recognize that they must prepare their students to live in a society which is in-between ancient Aboriginal linguistic and cultural ways and the competing realities and pressures of the dominant society.

Doris remembers not being comfortable in her own elementary and secondary schooling experiences, which has led her to re-story a new place in her community high school as a place connected to the kind of cultural knowing that she values. Her passion for Aboriginal cultural knowledge that can connect to and validate her own students' lives has led her to choose and use Aboriginal literature that is not "approved." She goes further to examine critical issues that schools typically don't teach, such as the Holocaust-Aboriginal Genocide link. She also uses her understanding of how she learned as a Mi'kmaw person to shape her pedagogy of collaboration and holistic approaches to process writing.

Nicole, after the teaching of her father, has found ways to honor both Aboriginal and European knowledge alongside each other and validate Mi'kmaw knowledge by showing it to be science. Through traditional medicines and contemporary card games she situates her students' cultural lives at the center of school knowledge. Using both Mi'kmaw and English languages in her pedagogy allows her to teach concepts more clearly and deeply. Analogies to Mi'kmaw concepts serve as bridges to English scientific ones and affirm her students' confidence in their own linguistic knowledge.

These three teachers' cultural practical knowledge show the importance they place upon passing on values and ways of relating with one another that teach group relationships and identity. They have been taught the significance of their collective identities as Mi'kmaw people that come from an understanding of their language and relational values, and they realize their collective identities require an education system that is committed to returning to the teachings which define their shared cultural knowledge. An

understanding of the relationships and values that come from the teachings of their own families, together with the realities of contemporary social and family dynamics in their community, give expression to their cultural practical knowledge. It is to the relational dimension of this cultural practical knowledge that we now turn.

MI'KMAW TEACHERS' CULTURAL PRACTICAL KNOWLEDGE RESPECTS INDIGENOUS VALUES AND RELATIONSHIPS

Freda's Mi'kmaw relationality: "As Mi'kmaq teachers, we're sometimes like an accomplice because we can ask a child what's wrong and then we know."

In my class, crackers, juice and cereal are quite common. By a certain time of day, I know certain kids will always be hungry. Now the kids who can have started bringing in food to share with the class for a snack. Each week a different one brings something and gives it to me to hand out with a big smile. In Mi'kmaq, we'll tell the student to thank their mother for us, and to give her a big hug. So sharing is part of our culture. I always buy extra groceries, because I hate it when someone asks me for something and I don't have it. I've taught my kids to give things out if I'm not home. There's always something for people in need. This is just part of our identity.

In my class, all the students wear their hats. I don't mind this and I don't insist that they take them off. We were at a meeting, and one of the teachers was complaining about a student who refused to take off his hat and coat, and she had already sent him to time-out five times for this. I said, 'Did you ever ask him why? It wouldn't bother me if you were sitting there wearing your coat. Maybe you're cold. Why does it bother you so much that he has his coat on in time-out? Did you notice that his shirt is dirty? Did you know that his parents drink? I know the family. Maybe he just doesn't have any clean clothes. This is his security and you're sending him to time-out for this. It's foolish and you're making the kid more upset.' They think that just because they're kids we can order them around. And so he missed all that work, and he was getting more and more upset. This teacher always has a frown on her face. I don't think I've ever seen her smile. When I walk into class early, I tease my kids and act silly with them. I have a kid who won't take his shoes off, and I know it's because his socks are filthy, and I let him leave them on.

On Fridays we do a circle and I tell them about the past. If one person is talking, then we show respect and listen to that person. Whatever they say, you listen to them and you don't interrupt. We talk about our parents, our homes and who we should respect. I understand the home environment. One of my kids was acting violently and I knew where he was coming from. He's been taught at home that it's okay to fight. His parents told him that a man won't walk away from a fight. He's got all this background, so I worked with him and taught him that it's okay not to hit people.

One day a nice pair of scissors went missing. I asked the class to drop everything and to look for them. One little boy wasn't moving and he looked like he didn't know what to do. I said I really hoped we found them, because I didn't think

anyone in the class would ever steal. Then, when he thought I wasn't looking, I saw him rush out to the bathroom and when he came back he had the scissors, and he told me he found them in the sink. So I used that approach, and he beamed and said, 'Nobody steals in here, teacher.'

If someone starts teasing a kid in my class, I'll drop the curriculum right away, and we'll have a circle and talk about it. We talk about how it feels to be teased and how you can hurt people with your words. I never make them say, 'I'm sorry.' I don't believe in doing that because it's fake. They'll apologize when they're ready. I see a lot of people trying to force it, but if you are made to say it against your will it doesn't mean anything.

I can't stand violence in my classroom, and there are two boys who used to get into fights. I told them, 'Think about what you did and how much this scares us. It's not just you guys, but the whole classroom. You're scaring people, you're ruining stuff and you're hurting me.' And then after a while, they ended up sitting together and they started playing together and everything was okay.

A lot of parents are giving their kids Ritalin these days. I don't believe in it and I don't like it. I would try to work with the child, and I would never suggest any drugs. Last year I had a parent come in and her son was all over the place. She wanted to put him on Ritalin, and she was worn out and tired. I told her that all he needed was discipline. I worked with him for a while, and as it turned out, he had an ear infection and it was messing him up. The drugs are a quick fix; it only covers up the problem. Sometimes I try to help parents learn to teach their kids. There was one boy who was out of control, and I would sit with him and read him stories to try to calm him down. I told his mother, 'Love is scolding. I love my grandchildren but I'm not scared to scold them if they get into trouble. That's how you teach a child.' I was trying to teach her parenting skills. If he did good one week, I'd call her at home, and I would tell her to keep praising him and making sure that he's getting to bed early. It worked with him and he's still not taking Ritalin. If he was on Ritalin, he'd be kicked out of my classroom every couple of days. One of my students is on Ritalin, and he forgot to take it one day. His hands were shaking from the withdrawal so bad that the poor kid couldn't even color. The next he had taken his pills and he was sitting there like a zombie.

When you take your kids somewhere, they have to be in a straight line, because someone from administration might be watching you. I tell them, 'Get in line or you'll get in trouble.' They think that I can't even control my kids. 'Why are they laughing like that?' If it's too noisy, they think the kids aren't learning. They want quiet and sitting down and everyone doing their work. But the kids are learning – there is communication going on.

I also think the resource teacher should be Mi'kmaq, because I've worked with students in there who aren't receiving any of the help they need because the resource person doesn't understand the problems they are facing. The students aren't sure of what the resource teachers are telling them, and a lot of Mi'kmaq feel shame to admit that they don't understand in English. But to say it in Mi'kmaq is totally different. As Mi'kmaq teachers, we're sometimes like an accomplice because we can ask a child what's wrong and then we know. We can have a little talk with them and find out what they're going through. We know

when they're hungry, because we're here all the time. Or if the kid's been up until two o'clock, we know that, because we are from the community.

Doris's Mi'kmaw relationality: "Some students are dealing with so much."

There's a lot of classism here. There are families who are better off and then there are the poor families. One student told me that his family is one of alcoholics and drug addicts. He's got low esteem, so I call him the star of my classroom. He feels like a star here, because he's doing very well, and I find he's coming to school more and more. If I could reach all students that way, I'd be very happy, because some students are dealing with so much.

I'm always here after school. I usually tend to stay here until six or seven, but my job still doesn't end then. When I come home, sometimes students call me up to ask for help. Students will come to my house to work on papers, and I'll help them. The door is always open, they can call and come over, or see me after school. And the students that graduated two years ago, I'm tutoring them at university. When a student swears in my class, I don't throw the student out; I just remind him where he is. Then he'll apologize and it's all over and done with.

I had one student last year who asked if we could go to my classroom, because I just happened to be off that period. We went in and sat down and she was shaking, and I knew she was quite upset. She said that her father woke her up for school, and he was really high. He was really mad at them and calling names to her mother, and so she spoke up on behalf of her mother. She said, 'Big mistake, my father hit me and my mother threw me out.' She was crying and crying, and I sat down with her and asked if she wanted something to eat, because I knew she didn't have anything for breakfast. I went downstairs, got her my sandwich and some juice, and gave it to her. She sat down and I tried to settle her down as much as possible. I told her to try to relax for a few minutes, and I went downstairs to report it to the principal. She ended up calling her aunt and staying there for a few months. I was kind of surprised, because she said, 'I didn't know where to go. The only place I could think about was school. Am I safe here? Will the cops come and arrest me, because my mom called the cops on me?' I said that in order for them to come here, they have to call the principal first; they can't come here and arrest you. She was really afraid and upset, and now she comes to me to talk every now and again.

I don't think much of homework; we tend to do in-class assignments instead. With homework, forget it, they aren't going to do it, and it's about time the school realizes this. When a child gets home they have to help out with the house, clean up, do this or that. Or that child may be experiencing problems at home. It's time that teachers realize most of these kids come from troubled homes, or they live in homes where they take a huge amount of responsibility. I think that when they do have free time, they should be with their friends or doing something with their family, not just constant homework every night.

I think my biggest problem here is attendance. This morning I had only half the class here, and it's usually like that first period every morning. I'm thinking that if we could get students to come to school, that would be excellent because it's really difficult if we've read three chapters or acts, and then the student decides

to come back. There is one student like this now, and I don't recommend that she come back. She tried to commit suicide last year, because of the stress of trying to catch up with her work. English is a very difficult subject; imagine trying to get caught up on two months of work.

The problem we have here has a lot to do with alcohol and drug abuse. So, hopefully I'll get to talk to them about it; I talk openly about alcohol and drug abuse. We're starting a unit on April Raintree, so I'm going to work in conjunction with the rehab here, because the book deals with these things. Students will tell me, 'My mother was stoned last night,' or, 'My father was drunk and he beat me up.' These are the situations that we are faced with and it's really difficult.

I let them voice their own opinions about sex and they talk about alcohol and drugs. They always ask if I'll tell on them and I say, 'No, what goes on in the classroom stays in the classroom. If you decide to share something with the class, then I'm willing to listen. Or if you want to tell me something, I'm here.' So I kind of opened that door to them, and I find that the students respect me more. I tell them that I'm only human. They ask if I've ever done drugs and alcohol in the past, and, they say, 'You're the first teacher that ever actually opened up to us.' I don't think there's a perfect person out there, and if you see a teacher as human, I think that has a lot to do with it. They see me in the community, they see me with my daughter. Some of the other teachers get mad at me, because they say I am the only teacher here to allow drinks in my classroom. I said, 'Well, you're drinking coffee in your classroom, meanwhile the students are sitting there asking if they can go for a drink every two minutes.' Instead of having them do that, I'd rather have them bring their breakfast, bring whatever they want to eat or drink. I find it cruel not to let them.

Nicole's Mi'kmaw relationality:

"We're all in this together, and we're respectful."

My class isn't about, 'Sit at your seat and raise your hand if you need to answer or ask a question.' There are days when I will be strict with assignments that need to be done, but there are days when I feel like learning is best when it is informal. If they come up to the front, ask questions, and sit on a desk, it's not necessarily a sign of disrespect. They don't have to sit in a chair to learn. It's a sign of comfort; they want to be close to me. They come to me and they are not afraid to ask any question, whether it be in terms of my life history or sexuality or whatever. They know I'll be honest with them, and I'm not afraid to answer. I'll answer in a professional manner, which makes it less intimidating for them. Most of the students fight to be near the front of the room. If kids are lying on the desks with their calculators, it doesn't bother me because they are learning. If you want to be comfortable, then so be it. We're all in this together, and we're respectful. I love my kids to be learning in that kind of environment, without telling them, 'sit at your seat, raise your hand, open your book and take your hat off.' It's more time-consuming, so I don't dwell on these things. But I won't tolerate swearing. And coming to class without your books is another one I discourage. But other than that, if students want to sit at my desk to listen, then fine, sit at my desk. If you want to type your notes, then sure, you don't have to use a pen. Not too many high school classes are like that.

In my class we have a homework derby. Every time they do their homework they get a ballot and it goes in the derby for prizes. We draw every Friday, and they like to win stuff, so they always want homework, and they will finish it. They'll say, 'Please, Miss, what's for homework? The bell's gonna ring!' At first I gave them homework that was easy, just to get them started on getting ballots. I found it myself, but it really helps in terms of getting the students motivated to do their homework. I'm making it fun, and they know the more times they get ballots, the more chances they have to win on Fridays. They can't wait for Fridays; therefore my attendance is not so bad, because if you aren't here then you can't win. The kids do their homework more so than last year or first semester.

One student in my class writes slower. I keep a photocopier in my class that helps him. There are days when he can keep up, but it's a struggle for him. Some days he tries so hard, and he just can't, so I tell him just to sit there and pay attention and we'll get the notes photocopied. Now he knows that if he's not able to keep up, he can sit down and relax and ask questions, if need be. I know he's learning, because when I ask a question, he'll answer in Mi'kmaq. So whose language am I going to evaluate him on, the language where he is perfectly correct or the language where he has no understanding of the big terms or words? When he tells me in Mi'kmaq, he knows his stuff, so I don't dwell too much on his expression in English. As long as he can answer in Mi'kmaq, that's all I want. I know he's learning.

My advice for high school teachers is to try to learn about the culture as much as you can. If the kids know that you know about their culture, then they are going to be more interested and motivated.

CULTURAL PRACTICAL KNOWLEDGE SHAPES CONTEMPORARY MI'KMAW IDENTITY THROUGH RELATIONALITY

These teachers' cultural practical knowledge is given expression through their knowing that comes from being raised with the stories and practices of their Mi'kmaq families and seeing the ways their students' families are living amidst the dynamics of community change. As an elementary teacher, Freda is committed to the development of a hidden curriculum that demonstrates a form of living that draws upon the understanding she has made of Mi'kmaq values from the past. She also realizes and takes seriously her responsibility as a teacher to pass on her understanding of these values. Her cultural practical knowledge, shaped by their own family and community stories, finds expression through her commitment to pass on and honour Mi'kmaq cultural knowledge that is supportive of family and community values.

Freda knows the importance of Mi'kmaq values of sharing, respect, and helping and works to demonstrate these for her students. She recognizes that in some homes, children are not getting cultural and spiritual guidance and she uses opportunities within her classroom to teach these values. Her sensitivity to the need to help parents to assist their children is possible

because of her own history within the community, and this has shaped her desire to listen to the children and empathize with their situation. She acts in an advocacy role for students and challenges ritualized stories that continue to determine how many non-Aboriginal teachers create discipline for Mi'kmaw children. She does so by re-framing these ritualized stories within the perspectives of Mi'kmaw children's lives in the community.

These secondary teachers also recognize, and place at the heart of their curriculum, the community context and social pressures and issues facing students. Their own stories of struggle are reflected in the way they centre their curriculum on their students' stories in relation to the social issues that challenge them. They are also able to see ways to make their curriculum content and pedagogy sensitive to the needs of their students' for self-esteem, affirmation, and teenager identity.

Doris recognizes and accounts for the poverty and other social issues that affect some of her students. She reaches out to these children to build up their self-esteem, and her sensitivity has created a haven for her students amidst often-turbulent lives. She sees her curriculum content not only as teaching educational concepts, but as a way to provide her students with a window into their lives in relation to social issues such as drugs and alcohol that are affecting their community. The openness and honesty that she cultivates by sharing her own stories of being a teenager opens up a relational space with her students that encourages a conversation that is supportive of their own struggles and concerns. Her classroom environment has become a place in which her students find it possible to give expression to their own emerging cultural knowledge.

Nicole strives to create a comfortable physical space that allows students to move about freely, and they cluster close to her during instruction. Her honesty and openness with them, in which she shares her own stories, encourage their voices. Moreover, she infuses a sense of fun into difficult challenges such as homework, and encourages reluctant students to learn in ways that affirm their strengths and downplay their weaknesses.

Relationality for these three teachers is manifested in their life-long commitment to supporting their students as they navigate through a school and social system that is not always open to the ways of students' home lives. Their efforts promote open discussions about social issues through their own deep and personal encounters with these social issues. These teachers live at the intersection of school and home, and work to make Mi'kmaw values such as respect and honesty a centerpiece of students' journey towards a collective Mi'kmaw identity.

DISCUSSION:

CULTURAL PRACTICAL KNOWLEDGE IS NECESSARY FOR DECOLONIZATION

Early Aboriginal educators initiated the ongoing process of decolonization in the education system in Nova Scotia in the 1970s. Bear-Nichols (2001), Grant (1995) and Hesch (1995) argue that graduates of First Nations education programs across Canada are colonized into the ways of the colonizer through university and school institutions. Earlier work by one of us with First Nations educators from northern Saskatchewan begins to identify some of the ways one education program reinforced Aboriginal identity (Friesen & Orr, 1998; Orr & Friesen, 1999). This work also shows the powerful impact of experiences with family in out-of-school places such as home and the trapline on the formation of these educators' knowledge. Analysis of colonialism must strive to account for the powerful narrative life histories Aboriginal educators bring to their teacher preparation programs and carry onwards with them into their practice in schools.

The stories of these three Mi'kmaw teachers show their convictions to live Aboriginality in their work. They have thought carefully about the home and community cultural learning and socialization of the Mi'kmaw children in their classrooms. They have been determined to address the gap between these ways and the ways of learning promoted in the schooling these children are experiencing. Rather than attempting to bring this cultural learning closer to the institutional story of school, their stories reveal their commitment to living a "new Mi'kmaw cultural story" with their students in their classrooms so that students' cultural knowledge, at the intersection of contemporary and past stories, are affirmed. In this way, they are living the kind of decolonizing education system that the National Indian Brotherhood, (1972), Hookimaw-Witt (1998) and the Assembly of First Nations (1988) have advocated.

Pedagogy, to these teachers, calls for their commitment to Mi'kmaw perspectives at the center of the content they teach. Rather than deficits to be overcome and replaced, their students' talk, values, and worldviews are used as "funds of knowledge" from which to teach and validate (Moll & Gonzalez, 1997) – *an Indigenous pedagogical consciousness to their cultural practical knowledge*. Appropriate examples from their students' lives help build the school curriculum upon the validity of Mi'kmaw community and cultural knowledge, and serve to validate their students' family, community, and tribal knowledge (Banks, 1996). These teachers strive to overcome inequities by challenging the inaccuracies and inadequacies in school knowledge and making strong linkages between school knowledge and the wider society from which these students come. These Mi'kmaw educators ensure their students have opportunities to become engaged in curriculum associated with their own communities and the issues of great relevance to their

Mi'kmaw nation. Their pedagogy reveals how they make connections between First Nations students' lives and the content being explored.

Their stories led these teachers to develop affirming and respecting practices (Gay, 2000; Nieto, 1996) to support their students as they bring their 'different' "interests, culture and history into the classroom" (Delpit, 2002, p. 48) – *an Indigenous relational consciousness to their cultural practical knowledge*. Relationality finds expression through their commitment to the development of their students' learning about solidarity within the group, and the values and norms they use to enhance their students' understanding of their shared Mi'kmaw culture. Relationality affirms a collective Mi'kmaw cultural identity, rooted in family stories of language and values, as a first priority. It also demonstrates curricular values of how to live together respectfully and responsibly as part of their wider Mi'kmaw community. They strive to enhance their students' feelings of competence by supporting them in ways that allow them to believe in themselves as Mi'kmaw people. They realize that appropriate relationships with these particular students cannot be separated from their Mi'kmaw language or values.

We found these three teachers' cultural practical knowledge to be saturated with a deep political and socio-cultural consciousness. Their cultural practical knowledge is fueled and sustained by their stories, and lives through their commitment to change as expressed through affirming, validating, and challenging actions. Their own stories have made them very aware of the multiple and pervasive ways that schools can place serious and long-lasting limitations upon Mi'kmaw students – *an Indigenous political consciousness to their cultural practical knowledge*. These teachers' cultural practical knowledge is connected to how they have lived the story of being marginalized by the dominant society in which their own schooling was embedded. Their remembered stories of how they navigated their school system by seeking support from their families and by their own determination have shaped their own teacher stories of relationality. They learned that the institutional story of Eurocentric schools placed little relevance upon their Mi'kmaw ways. Their past stories helped them come to see the importance of acting as change agents in schools to overcome inequities by teaching against the grain (Cochrane-Smith, 1991), despite its lonely, exclusionary, undefined and uncharted path.

As Mi'kmaw people these teachers believe Mi'kmaw identity can and must be placed in a more central way in schools. Their cultural practical knowledge helps them live in schools that are still struggling to fulfill the vision set out by Aboriginal leaders in 1972. They are political agents, choosing to teach from a perspective that embodies cultural practical knowledge in relation to their students' lives in the present, remembering their collective ancestral past, and imagining a different cultural future.

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