

# LEARNING TO SEE WHAT THEY CAN'T: DECOLONIZING PERSPECTIVES ON INDIGENOUS EDUCATION IN THE RACIAL CONTEXT OF RURAL NOVA SCOTIA

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WITH INDIGENOUS COMMENTARY

**ABSTRACT.** Frequently members of dominant groups understand problems of inequity as being rooted in the 'oppressed group.' Less often do members of dominant groups understand their own implication in oppression. In this self-study involving predominately white teachers in rural Nova Scotia, the author describes the process of her own and these teachers' struggle to more clearly understand their social location and the implications of power and privilege for their work in classrooms. Various lenses of critical theory, anti-racism and feminism guide the work.

**APPRENDRE À VOIR CE QU'ILS NE PEUVENT VOIR : DÉCOLONISER LES  
POINTS DE VUE SUR L'ÉDUCATION DES AUTOCHTONES DANS LE CONTEXTE  
RACIAL DE LA NOUVELLE-ÉCOSSE RURALE**

**RÉSUMÉ.** Il est fréquent que les membres des groupes dominants interprètent les problèmes d'iniquité comme étant enracinés dans le « groupe opprimé ». Il est plus rare que les membres des groupes dominants comprennent le propre rôle qu'ils jouent dans l'oppression. Dans cette auto-analyse qui intéresse avant tout les enseignants de race blanche dans la Nouvelle-Écosse rurale, l'auteur décrit la lutte menée par ces enseignants pour mieux comprendre leur situation sociale et les répercussions du pouvoir et des privilèges pour leur travail en classe. Divers objectifs de la théorie critique, de l'antiracisme et du féminisme orientent ces travaux.

## *Background*

A recent task force studying the achievement of Mi'kmaw\* students in a provincial school in Nova Scotia showed that they were graduating from high school at a rate of 20% as compared to the 95% graduation rate for non-native peers in the same school (Strait Regional School Board, 2000). As a teacher-educator and researcher working with this particular commu-

\* Throughout this article the author is 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.

nity that is so poorly served by schooling, I was interested in the way that some of the white educators in the school thought about this disparity in graduation rates.

*Most of the teachers say that basically it's a case that the Mi'kmaw parents and the community don't value education. The teachers say that the parents simply don't care about education and so the kids learn not to care about it. The teachers say it's hard to succeed when they've got those kinds of attitudes at home. (Field notes, 2000).*

The graduation rate for First Nations students throughout the country has not risen above 50% (Nicholas, 2000) yet it takes a great deal of effort to have white educators see it as a problem that schools should be addressing.

*It is our first day into our week long course "Issues in Diversity" and I ask Steven (a course participant) how the Mi'kmaw students are doing in his middle school. "Fine," he states confidently without further thought. By the fourth day of the intensive summer institute he comes back to me and says "I think I would need to rethink how the Mi'kmaw students are doing. I think I'd have to start seeing this place from their perspective." (Field notes, July, 2001)*

In the worse case scenario, the white educators in the school do not 'see' that there is any issue of inequity to be addressed. When they are made aware of the situation, they often adopt a 'blame the victim' approach which locates the problem of underachievement outside their individual or collective sphere of influence. Interestingly, many white educators use the same limited thinking when they think (if they do) about the underachievement of African Nova Scotians in public schools in the province. The pattern of school failure among African students throughout rural Nova Scotia is, in fact, very similar to that of Mi'kmaw students. (Black Learners Advisory Council, 1994).

*I am working with Ralph and we have been having a discussion on racism particularly as it relates the incidents around Cole Harbour High School (a Nova Scotia School which has received national attention for race related incidents). After the discussion he says "I would have to say that the Black students in our school are not having any of the kinds of problems that we are talking about here. There's no problems of racism at our school (located in rural Southwestern Nova Scotia)." (Field notes, 1998)*

In my on-going work over the past six years with white educators, in largely rural Nova Scotia settings, I have rarely heard the problem of underachievement of African Nova Scotian and Mi'kmaw students framed as an issue of racism. Most often the problem is denied, as in the case of the second and third examples cited above. When statistical proof shows the problem of underachievement to be, in fact, tied to racial and cultural affiliation it is framed as an individual, family, community or cultural problem. Seldom have I heard the problem framed within the larger context of racism and

rarely is the role that the school itself might play in such differential achievement by students examined in any critical fashion.

*Locating myself in this work*

Before I begin, I must locate myself in this work and think about the position from which I speak. I am a white, middle class, multidegreed, able-bodied, heterosexual female who grew up and completed public school and university in both rural and urban Nova Scotia. My Irish, Acadian and Scottish roots connect me to most of the province's most well-known icons. Bagpipes and Celtic music are familiar on my landscape. During my seventeen years of 'schooling' in Nova Scotia I was taught nothing of the history, language, culture or current events of the Mi'kmaw people, except for the rare paragraph in a Social Studies textbook which described their lives 500 years ago. I had managed never to set foot on any of the thirteen First Nations communities here. My only early images of "Mi'kmaw" were of people who sold 'clothesline props' in our small rural village or people who made pretty baskets for my dolls to sleep in. As was typical of most white Nova Scotians, I was familiar with a world that did not include Mi'kmaw people. Later, I became a teacher and headed to the Northwest Territories to teach, carrying with me a few pedagogical skills and an enormous amount of ignorance about Inuit or any other Aboriginal people, for that matter. I spent the next fifteen years' working in the Eastern Arctic region of what is currently Nunavut, as a teacher, consultant for inclusive education, school principal and teacher educator. My tenure in Nunavut coincided with a period of tremendous energy, struggle and excitement. *Learning, Tradition and Change*, the findings of the Special Legislative Committee on Education (1982) for the (then) Northwest Territories, had just been published based on consultation with students, parents, teachers and elders. The report called for a major 'rethinking' and overhauling of the education system to make it more responsive to the needs of Dene and Inuit students. The Baffin region embraced *Learning, Tradition and Change* in probably the most serious fashion of all the Territories.

The legacy of colonization had left tremendous power imbalance between Inuit and Qallunaat (the term Inuit use for non-Inuit people) and so began my own personal and professional journey down the road of trying to 'get back to Inuit education.' It was and is a journey that has profoundly shaped my life. Reflecting on my own experiences, learning from other educators and reading about the colonization among other peoples (the Maori, the Navajo, the Yu'pik), I began to understand the sociopolitical context of schooling and the ways in which schools can be sites of hope for indigenous people or sites of further marginalization. My research experience led me to explore ways in which Inuit schools could be more culturally based (Tompkins, 1998). Later, I worked with Inuit educational leaders in explor-

ing their understandings of leadership and thinking about how leadership might be reconceptualized in Inuit-based schools (Nunavut Education Councils, 2000). When I returned 'South' to work in a teacher education program in rural Nova Scotia I saw striking parallels between Mi'kmaw and Inuit experiences of schooling. As such, my teacher education work became more and more framed in the context of anti-racist work. As I discuss later in this paper, my own position in this work requires constant examination. "Just who do I think I am?" is a question I must ask myself as I proceed.

I currently have the opportunity to work with predominately white educators in a graduate course in ways that might help them begin to see what, up to this point, they don't see – racism and how it is played out in the school systems of rural Nova Scotia. Such a course can be a site where some real anti-racist work can be done, where issues of equity and social justice can be explored. Cultivating and supporting anti-racist perspectives and practices continues to be challenging for schools (Ryan, 1999) since schools themselves are embedded in larger systems that privilege certain students, certain knowledge, certain ways of being – at the expense of other students, other knowledge, other ways of being in the world. In the case of indigenous education, the process of colonization is clearly the single most important issue in understanding perspectives on schooling and education. Dei (1996) reminds us that

... school teachers, counselors, administrators, janitors, cafeteria workers, bus drivers and other staff members address racial and ethno-cultural differences in their schools daily. Some do it by attempting to 'keep difference from being explosive.' One way to do this is by attempting to ignore and erase the differences that students bring into the classes. (p. 9)

Part of my work over the past six years has been working with groups of current and aspiring educational leaders in the context of a graduate school course in anti-racist education. In this paper I document, describe and evaluate the processes used to deconstruct and transform their educational thinking around the indigenous education in the racial context of rural Nova Scotia. Using my own field notes, journal entries as an instructor, conversations with participating teachers, and reflections by participants on the course material, I examine the successes and challenges of the work I am doing.

Graduate courses at our university are 36 hours in length. This particular graduate course is offered in an intensive week-long 'summer institute' fashion allowing us extended periods of time for interpersonal work. In two cases, the course was offered as a split institute combination of three days of intensive summer work followed by three Saturdays spread over the fall semester.

Participants in the course are teachers with at least two-years' classroom experience and the majority have between eight- and 20-years' experience in predominately rural Nova Scotian schools. The majority of the participants are white teachers in each cohort of approximately twenty-five; however, there is always a small number of African Nova Scotian teachers and/or Mi'kmaw educators (between two and three) in the course. All participants are either current or aspiring educational leaders. The ratio of female to male teachers in the group is usually 3:1.

### *Perspectives of white educators*

Part of the challenge of doing anti-racist work with white educators is the task of leading people to see what they have, up to this point in their lives, been unable to see. James and Shadd (1994), in their book *Talking About Difference*, speak of how many Canadians, particularly those who belong to the dominant group, end up living in very small worlds surrounded by people like themselves. The authors state that, in spite of the great diversity that exists throughout the country in terms of class, race, gender, ability, religion, or sexual orientation, most Canadians of the dominant group do not know this diversity. Like the side-by-side "moving sidewalks" in the Toronto airport, dominant Canadians end up traveling on a path with people who are very similar to them – alongside, but never intersecting with, people who are different from them. Dominant Canadians view non-dominant Canadians from a distance. They see them as people on another escalator far away. In the case of white Nova Scotians, the escalator they are traveling on is far ahead of the one that their Mi'kmaw brothers and sisters are traveling on. The few cases of TB that exist in Nova Scotia exist on Mi'kmaw reserves. On every indicator of community health and wellness – be it life expectancy, access to employment, school completion – white communities fare far better than Mi'kmaw communities. To get off the 'moving escalator' requires a great deal of effort – the 'hegemonic' flow urges us to look forward – not to look beside or behind and certainly not to look back. However, the times when dominant group members are able to leave their single track and travel the path of the oppressed person are the moments of great learning and hope. "When I can see what you can see the distance between us disappears" (James, 2001). How to get people, in this case white educators working in rural Nova Scotia, to see what up to this point in their lives they haven't been able to see, has been a large part of my quest in this work. In this paper I try to examine my work in a critical fashion.

The course itself tends to divide into three major areas. The first focuses on establishing ways of working in the course. The second involves working with participants to name power and privilege with a view to articulating

and critically examining their own biography. The third piece involves making spaces for participants to be able to hear the voices and stories of people within Mi'kmaw and African Nova Scotian communities in rural Nova Scotia in order to see how the unexamined practice of schooling contributes to the marginalization of these students.

At the crux of the work of decolonizing white educators' conceptions of race and inequity is their conception of knowledge. Colonialist conceptions of knowledge equate knowledge with truth. It is 'out there,' it is largely uncontested and it happens to coincide with the beliefs of the dominant group. In the case of Nova Scotia schools, it has been about centering that which is Eurocanadian and pushing that which is Indigenous off to the margins, if not totally off the landscape. Traditionally the journey in schools has been about acquiring that knowledge, that canon, that has been deemed as truth. However, the work of critical multiculturalists and anti-racist educators is to see, as McLaren (1989) asserts, that knowledge is "social construction deeply rooted in a nexus of power relations" (p. 169). McLaren calls educators to go beyond technical and practical knowledge and conceive of knowledge in emancipatory ways—to see knowledge that understands how social relationships are distorted by power and privilege. It is this kind of knowledge that can serve as a foundation in schools working for social justice. Having white Nova Scotian educational leaders see that the knowledge base and the social relationships in rural Nova Scotian schools are constructed around issues of power and privilege is essentially the task at hand. They need to see, as Nieto (1996) states, that schools "primarily reflect the knowledge through the curriculum and the school environment" (p. 284). Dei (1996) calls educators to hear and dialogue with the multiple voices that come into classrooms each day. He argues that curriculum which acts as if there were only one voice is woefully inadequate. Nieto (1996) urges educators to bring these "multiple and contradictory perspectives" into our classrooms (p. 319). And all of this is ultimately about power—who has the power to define the agenda in the first place.

### *Addressing issues of power*

I approach this work with the goal in mind of trying to help white educators see what they cannot see. As illustrated by the three vignettes at the beginning of the paper I can generally be certain that the white educators who come into the course will not have thought about problematizing the knowledge, the social relationships and the educational practices in their schools. I approach this work therefore knowing that, if I do it well, it will 'disrupt, interrupt, challenge and unsettle' the things we as white educators 'take for granted' (Frank, 2001). I approach this work knowing that I need to create time and spaces for people to be able to hear and see in fresh ways what they have not seen or heard. Knowing the potentially transformational

aspect of this work means that I pay a great deal of attention to process in these courses. I am acutely aware that within the class there are issues of power and privilege at play. I also know that if I do not provide any intentional structure for working together, it is quite likely that issues of power and privilege will reign in discussion groups in quite predictable ways. Left on their own, the 'titled' leaders will often take up more space than the 'non-titled' leaders; the white teachers will speak more than their African Nova Scotian and Mi'kmaw colleagues; the more experienced teachers will have more of the floor than the less experienced teachers; and quite frequently the male teachers will speak more than the female teachers. I have learned from my personal and professional experience as a teacher of elementary children and as a teacher and educational leader in Inuit settings that the 'way' we are with each other is actually part of the colonizing experience we live out in schools.

Working with adults, as is the case when working with children, facilitators need to "explicitly teach these procedures with the same care and attention that they would teach the content" (Nova Scotia Educational Leadership Consortium, 2001, p. 52). To this end I use the principles and practices of cooperative learning in my teaching, modified in small ways for work with adults. I help educators see the important distinctions between just doing 'group work' and doing cooperative learning activities. 'Group work' can simply reinscribe power relationships in smaller settings whereas cooperative learning aims to create more democratic spaces for learning. I am consciously aware of why I am being so intentional in my creation of more democratic spaces in which all voices can be heard and I explicitly share this agenda with the participants. I hope that they will use the techniques in our course but also carry these practices back into their own classrooms and staffrooms and in so doing begin to create more spaces for multiple voices and perspectives in their settings.

Very early on in the course, after we have done some 'ice-breaking,' 'trust-building' kinds of activities, and after I have had some opportunity to get to know the group a bit, I organize the participants into 'base groups' of three-four people. These groups are created by myself as the facilitator and I attempt to build in as much difference in each base group as is possible, mixing up people of different age, gender, discipline, racial and cultural identity. I attempt to 'stretch' participants so that they are working outside their usual zone of comfort. A foundational principle of participatory and cooperative learning is that we learn a great deal from controversy. Often educators shy away from controversy. Yet we stand to learn much from people who hold different positions than our own. In other words, we would learn a lot more about ourselves and others if we got off our own 'escalator' more often. My goal is to have people working with people they don't work

with everyday so that they may start to see and hear different perspectives on schooling. In order to ensure active participation by all members of the class I use two strategies. The first strategy I use is to carefully respect the five principles of cooperative learning (positive interdependence, individual accountability, group processing, social skills training, face to face interaction) so that each task I give is truly cooperative in nature.

### *Ways of being*

The second strategy that I use to facilitate more democratic processes is the creation of a set of guiding principles about how we work together respectfully across difference. Part of my research process with Inuit educational leaders who are attempting to do decolonizing work in the education system in Nunavut has been about being able to name the ways that Qallunaat and Inuit can be with each other – can work together across difference to create a more level playing field for all educators (Nunavut Education Councils, 2000). The principles generally include specific, explicit ways that privileged educators can work to diminish that privilege and thereby work in respectful spaces and places with their colleagues. The principles are placed on a chart in the classroom and are reviewed as part of the opening of each class meeting and a way of publicly recommitting ourselves to more respectful ways of working together. The list borrows from the work of feminist (Lather, 1992; McIntosh, 1990), anti-colonialist (Tuhaiwi Smith, 1999), and anti-racist (Lee, 1985) educators. It includes the following kinds of statements:

1. *There are issues of power and privilege operating in this room. Let's try to think about our own power and privilege as we work to create a level playing field for participation in this room.*
2. *We need to hear "all" voices in the room to learn.*
3. *Let's avoid dividing the world into 'us' and 'them.'*
4. *Let's remember that there is tremendous diversity within any group. It is impossible to speak about 'all' women, or 'all straight people' or about 'all Christians' or about 'all Mi'kmaw people.'*
5. *Let's remember that our own personal experience is valid; however, it is not necessarily universal.*
6. *Let's avoid using the 'native' informant where one individual is expected to speak for an entire group. (see #3)*
7. *Those of us with more power and privilege in the room have a lot more unlearning to do and would do well to listen to the voices we haven't heard so often.*

The last item here is one that acknowledges the kind of struggle lying ahead if we are to truly do the decolonizing work that is required. It acknowledges that there cannot be the kind of growth required by people of privilege to come to understand their privilege without conflict, struggle and pain. It publicly states that:

8. *In order to achieve true dialogue we need to allow all our whole selves in the room. There is a place for anger, tears, confusion, laughter, and frustration in this room.*

### *The challenges of the work*

In my own work in trying to become an 'ally,' whether working in a respectful way alongside fellow Inuit or Mi'kmaw educators who are working toward culture-based schooling or my own anti-poverty work in Nova Scotia, I am reminded of the enormous power and privilege I bring to any relationship. My own journey in anti-racist education has been one of trying to move from an unconsciously arrogant position to what I hope is a consciously less arrogant one. The journey has not come easily and many of the lessons were painfully learned. It did not come in detached intellectual ways after reading a text. Most often it came from being in relationship with others – in a place where finally I could see and hear what I could not see and hear previously. I stress this point because it is the very messy side of what we do in anti-racist work with white educators. It is a surprise to teachers who take this course that *affective* work, intrapersonal and interpersonal work, are so much an integral part of the course. The teachers have been well taught and socialized to see knowledge and emotions as separate. In my work I am trying to help them see that "emotion needs to be validated as part of knowledge and not regarded as mere baggage, disconnected from knowledge" (Baier, 1986). For those whose pain and voice have not been heard, such a stance allows them to bring their full selves into the classroom and that includes the tears and anger that come from having lived in a country – indeed in a province – that most often denies the very existence of racism and other oppressions. For teachers of the dominant group, hearing the voices and the stories they have not heard allows them to hear the painful impact of individual, institutional and systemic racism as it is played out in Nova Scotia.

As a facilitator, working with a group of teachers using these processes places me in the continual position of learner. It is work that involves risk and as Dei (2002) reminds us it is not really about *who* can do this anti-racist work (whether it is members of dominant or oppressed groups) – it is more about *whether those who set out to do the work are willing to take the risks involved*. For there are risks involved, and those of us who come from more privilege and more comfort are often less inclined to risk losing those

privileges and comforts. It is not work to be entered into lightly. Of all the emotions that surface (and surface they do) most white educators, myself included, have the hardest time dealing with the anger, the rage that comes forth. As a person of privilege I have been afforded the luxury of not having to raise my voice to get what I need; my world usually works for me. However, I am reminded by my Inuit colleagues that "you Qallunaat don't hear me until I shout" (Field notes, 2000). I have been socialized to see anger in a negative way rather than as a reasonable response to unjust circumstances. However I am reminded that "if you don't like the anger, you shouldn't be in the margins" (Frank, 2001).

### *Naming power and privilege*

As the base groups are being established and as we are establishing the ways of working in the group we are also using Enid Lee's (1985) very effective 'flower of power' tool which allows us to begin to name power and privilege and locate our social position. Using myself as model I go through the flower looking at each petal and trying to determine how advantaged/disadvantaged I was as a young student going to public school in Nova Scotia in the 1960s. Each time I find an unearned advantage I color a petal of the flower. What I finish with is a practically totally colored flower. I share my own surprise at finding that the success I'd been attributing to my own 'hard work' as a student was very much due to my position of unearned and unnamed privileges that I carried into the school system. It was a surprise for me to learn as an adult that "I was born on third base, but I was told I had hit a triple." In anti-racist work there is a need to expose our own social location and place it in a large sociopolitical context. As Dei (1996) reminds us "the practice of anti-racist educational change is concerned with what education ought to, and can look like. One cannot articulate and fight for social change without an understanding of the current social and political order" (p.134). Each participant does the same flower analysis for her or his own life and reflects upon the findings. This activity is one of the key learnings in the course. For many white Nova Scotians it is a surprise to see themselves as privileged. Certainly if they compare themselves to western parts of the country they feel, and often are by economic standards, less well-off. Many of the teachers come from working class, working poor and poor backgrounds. They come from small, rural places which survived on a combination of fishing, farming and woodcutting. Many come out of industrial Cape Breton experience. They are sons and daughters of steelworkers and coal-miners, many of whom watched their fathers and grandfathers too often die young from the hard physical labour in toxic environments. Others come from families who were first generation immigrants in post-war Canada and who saw their grandparents and parents struggle against cultural and language barriers to 'make it' in Canada. These white educators

live in a part of Canada where unemployment has been high for generations, where leaving the region is often the only way to 'make it.' By virtue of becoming teachers these educators are now relatively privileged, but they are not far from working class roots. However their own analysis of their 'making it' has been through working hard, sacrificing and getting an education. These teachers are great believers in the meritocracy. The meritocracy appears to have worked for them and it appears to have worked for some of their parents and grandparents. And it has been a useful way of explaining the inequity that exists between Mi'kmaq and non-Mi'kmaq in the province. If they adhere to the principles of meritocracy Mi'kmaq must not be working hard enough.

It is a revelation to these teachers to use this language of power and privilege and to use the flower as a metaphor. Educators can start seeing how much a factor like class or race or gender can change the make-up of the flower and also how gender, race and class intersect with each other. In our discussions we talk about how we as teachers need to see the particular petals on the flower but we cannot see only the particular petals. We are called to see the flower in its complexity and see how each flower is different. Educators begin to see the social construction of self and the multiplicity of self as important concepts in understanding the students in their classrooms. Most white educators come to see that they have been advantaged in many ways which they had not considered and, equally important, that there are many colleagues and students who are disadvantaged in ways that they have, up to this point, not considered. Teachers often relate back to their personal biographies and it allows them to see issues of power and privilege more clearly. We talk about what it was to be a white steelworker working in Sydney steel mills in the 1960s and the kinds of difficult working conditions that the workers had to endure. Then we ask where the African Nova Scotian and Mi'kmaq workers were in the plant. The answer of course is that they were, in the first case, doing the most dangerous and difficult work and in the second case not even able to gain entry to the workforce. The notion that there is a 'level playing field' out there is challenged by contradictory evidence and stories that show privilege and power at play.

### *Hearing voices seldom heard*

Such moments mark the beginning of 'seeing what they cannot see.' At this point we often move into large group discussions where we try to share insights and listen to each other. White teachers *talk* about their new insights and begin the first tentative steps towards a 'rethinking' of their position. But when they *listen*, they really make strides in their learning. African Nova Scotian and Mi'kmaq teachers often share their painful stories in the racialized context of rural Nova Scotia. As a facilitator my task

is to monitor the process so that the stories come out. The stories they tell each other teach them a great deal. For many white educators it is their first time stepping off their own escalator and seeing what an African Nova Scotian or Mi'kmaw teacher sees. Marjorie Googoo,<sup>1</sup> a Mi'kmaw principal, speaks of quitting school on the day when a white teacher in a provincial school stood in front of the whole class of white students and said "You'll never guess who has the highest mark on the chemistry test – the Indian girl!" (the teacher never did learn her name). The story is not set in the 1950s or 1960s. It is from the late 1980s in rural Nova Scotia and there are countless more that continue to be painfully lived out among African Nova Scotian and Mi'kmaq in schools and communities. Many white educators will hear for the first time stories about the residential school experience in Shubenacadie and the legacy of that period. They will come to know that the provincial schools which followed on the heels of residential schools, while being much less overtly violent, continued and continue to be sites of colonization. The goals of schooling for indigenous children have not changed since contact. They are essentially still about the assimilation of Native students into the mainstream (Bear Nicholas, 2001). However, since white educators travel the escalator with people like themselves, because they watch biased local and national media that serve the interests of those in power, and because they manage to avoid being in real relationships with Mi'kmaw people, they do not know this reality. Such ignorance allows white educators not to become angry, disturbed or even aware of the shamefully low graduation rates that continue into this millennium among Aboriginal students.

Frequently white educators will have experienced class or gender or sexual orientation oppression that will allow them to understand inequity in a very real way. These stories are instructive to the group because it helps educators see the pattern of marginalization that occurs. Equally, not all Mi'kmaw educators have come to an analysis of their oppression that is anti-racist. Some have internalized their oppression and share stories which either minimize their oppression or support the meritocracy. It has happened that oppressed people can and do argue against the very structures that would lead to their emancipation. The possibility of such complexity and multiple representations has to be kept open in the class.

Once these awakenings begin, the course moves between small and large group discussion. In small cooperative groups educators read articles that will 'push their thinking.' I have found short narrative and autobiographical pieces written from non-dominant perspectives to be very helpful in this class. 'First voices' need to be brought into the classroom. The collections of Carl James are very useful tools for allowing first voices into the classroom. Guest speakers and films are also helpful. In my case, the lives and

stories of Mi'kmaw and African Nova Scotian educators in the room are a large part of the curriculum. White educators are required to look through the eyes of the oppressed to begin to see how the simplistic and false notion of meritocracy does disservice to the complexity of the lives that most Mi'kmaw and African Nova Scotian people live. Sometimes the members of the base group read and discuss the same article. Since the base groups have been structured for diversity there are differing opinions and perspectives in the groups which are instructive. White educators who have experienced class oppression will bring their particular insights to the same article. Women educators who are aware of the sexism in which they live and work will connect with the article in a different way than educators who have been socialized not to see sexism. Where there is an African Nova Scotian or Mi'kmaw educator in the base group the perspectives may be different again. At other times, the teachers participate in a jigsaw activity in which each person in the base group reads a different article and shares the article with the group. In either scenario there is time and space in the base group for deep talking, listening and thinking to occur. Large group discussion does not allow for the same depth. It is in the base groups that the participants are constructing, deconstructing and reconstructing their sense of race, class and gender in Nova Scotia. Cooperative learning techniques do this well for the "dialogue allows for the uncovering hidden agendas and perceptions to be healed and transformed" (Johnson, 1996, p. 9).

While the primary work of the course is to decolonize the thinking of white educators it is not only whites who have been colonized. Sometimes, Mi'kmaw educators, while they have lived the realities of racism in Nova Scotia, have also become colonized themselves in an education system and media that perpetuate the myth of meritocracy and deny systemic racism. Mi'kmaw educators will often see for the first time the parallels between their experience of marginalization and that of fellow African Nova Scotian students. They come to name their reality and locate their experiences within a larger sociopolitical context. As these teachers make connections to the experiences of other oppressed groups, they deepen and sharpen their critical analysis.

To allow for 'all the voices' to be heard frequent larger group circle activities take place on a regular basis to allow the base groups to hear other ideas from other groups. These groups are always intentionally structured with the goal of allowing full participation. Talking circles (borrowing from the Aboriginal tradition which passes a sacred object around a circle allowing the person who holds the object the right to speak), Red Stockings (borrowing from a feminist/socialist tradition which provides participants with equal numbers of tokens which they throw into the center each time they make a contribution), and talking webs (using yarn passed around from speaker to

speaker to create a web of interconnections) are preferred strategies for allowing 'all voices' to be heard.

### **Building relationships**

In the process of working together in these base groups and larger groups relationships are being formed. People are sharing in a personal and honest way and, for many educators, it is the first time that they have experienced this kind of learning. It is through these processes that the teachers are coming to know each other. For white teachers it is sometimes the first time they have really come to be in relationship with African Nova Scotian and Mi'kmaw educators. With the relationship comes the possibility of no longer seeing these educators from a distance view on a far away escalator. The following story illustrates just how separate the reality between white Nova Scotians and Mi'kmaw people can be. Maureen is a teacher who has lived in Sydney all her life. She is a confident, friendly and outgoing individual. There are two Mi'kmaw First Nation reserves within twenty minutes of Sydney. Maureen is 43 years old and she is just becoming aware of how her view of the world is rather limited.

*Well I was at the WalMart getting Hallowe'en candy for the kids and there was a Mi'kmaw women behind me with her cart full of candy too. And I thought "I'm going to talk to her." So I turned and said "How do they do Hallowe'en on the reserve?" And she told me about how they did it (at Eskasoni) and it was really interesting. It was very similar to what we do in Sydney. We had a really good conversation! That's the first time I've ever just had a conversation just like that with a Mi'kmaw person. I'm going to do that again. (Field notes, 2000)*

What is striking about Maureen's conversation is just how separate white people can be from Mi'kmaw people even though their paths would cross in many ways and at many times in Sydney. It is striking how intentional Maureen has to be about entering into this small interchange. Although provincial and rural schools bring white and Mi'kmaw students together, many factors work to prevent real relationships from forming. Far too frequently, white Nova Scotians only know 'about' Mi'kmaw people. Often what they know is minimal, incomplete and incorrect. And most frequently they simply don't 'know' any Mi'kmaw people in a real way. They lack the very personal relationships that would allow them to see how race, gender and class are played out in the context of rural Nova Scotia. They never get close enough to see 'what they need to see.'

I see my role as a facilitator as one of trying set up structures that will acknowledge the differential power in the room and create maximum opportunities for the most marginalized voices to be heard. In attempting to creating this space white educators may, and sometimes do, hear and see what they have not had an opportunity to hear and see previously. I am

trying to be what Sonia Nieto (1999) would call a “sociocultural mediator who is acutely aware of the sites of contested knowledge in the room” (p. 70). There is always the challenge of working with the tears, anger, and resentment as the marginalized educators in the class struggle to name the painful realities in which they and their students are forced to live. There is often denial, resentment, confusion, resistance and guilt as those educators from dominant positions attempt to hear and see the injustices of which they have previously been unaware.

*Some tensions in this work*

And of course there is my own position within all of this. I am still, by virtue of my dominant position, an outsider to this work. Narayan (1988) makes important contributions in understanding the work we do across difference. She speaks of ‘epistemic privilege’ which allows insiders to know their oppression in ways that outsiders never do. She cautions me as an ‘outsider’ about the mistakes I am apt to make. I am apt to minimize the emotional costs of oppression. I am able to miss subtle manifestations of oppression and I am likely to fail to see oppression in new contexts. And she reminds me very importantly that I must not assume that my goodwill in wanting to do anti-racist work is a guarantee against causing offence. As an outsider I may, and often do not ‘get it.’ Narayan does counsel me to enter in deep relationships with insiders so I can see some of what they see and she, like Blye Frank, urges me to try to understand the anger I will feel when I am among insiders and not be paralyzed by it.

But, I am, after all, a white Nova Scotian, sprayed by the racist mists of the ocean of injustice. As Corson says, “it is difficult for us as educational leaders to escape our social positioning for very long, if at all” (2000, p. 5). How do I, in my well-intentioned effort, (which Narayan argues is never enough), avoid reinscribing power by my mere presence. From my work in Nunavut I am aware that colonization goes on within the interactions between Qallunaat and Inuit on a daily basis. I am reminded of Linda Tuhiwai Smith’s (1999) sarcastic remark regarding post-colonial work. She says “Post-colonial? What? Have they left?” (p. 25). Colonization has taken place over centuries and continues to be with us in the present tense. I have lived in a world that, as Dei (1996) describes, has “created racial and cultural ‘others’ by negatively evaluating difference” (p. 123). I must continue in my journey with a sense of tentative humility. The times I have shared the delivery of this course with others who held different locations and positions were probably the times when the course was the strongest because multiple perspectives were continually being modeled.

I continue to believe that the voices/stories/experiences of the people are the foundation of the course around which a democratic, participatory

structure needs to be placed. However I do need to recognize that 'telling stories' is not enough. Scott (1992) says that "there are problems in claiming an 'authority of experience' without recognizing how power relationships shape the process of knowledge creation or construction. Personal experiences are lived through social relations of power" (p. 25). Again I am reminded that the complexity of the flower needs to be respected and that while people may experience marginalization, their own analysis of that experience may be empowering or disempowering.

I struggle to think about where we go after the course, where we go with some of the new awakenings. Twice the course was begun in the summer and continued in the fall session. After having been together for three days, educators went back into their schools in the fall and saw things in 'fresh' ways that disturbed them. They had begun to see what they had 'taken for granted.' They had begun in very small ways to challenge the "normalcy and fairness" in their schools (Dei, 1996, p. 128). The Saturdays in the fall where we met again proved to be very important meeting places in which we talked about ways of acting individually and, more important, acting collectively to bring about changes in attitudes and practices. However, acting collectively for social change is not something with which people of power and privilege and teachers in particular have much experience. Ironically, the parents and grandparents of many of these white educators come from traditions that would have valued collective work and struggle, whether it was from the very active labor movement in industrial Cape Breton or the establishment of fishing cooperatives and credit unions in rural Nova Scotia. Nonetheless, these educators have been well-schooled in values of individualism and competition rather than in cooperative work and collaboration. This course can create some awakenings to the fact that change needs to occur and help educators see that the present system of schooling is not serving all students. In fact many would argue that the current system was never designed to serve all students (Apple & Beane, 1998). However, these teachers need to know something of social change history and literature to learn the ways in which social change occurs. Without a sense of how change actually works and how to collectively work for social change, the course risks separating anti-racist theory from practice. What is needed, of course, is the integration of theory into practice.

The work described here is one small part of working towards trying to help white educators in Nova Scotia to rethink the work they do, why they do it and who it is for. Corson (2000) reminds us that there is sociocultural complexity in the work that educational leaders undertake. Too often educational leaders lack the understanding of, and the means to create, real intercultural and interclass dialogue. In the case of many white educators in the racialized context of rural Nova Scotia they need help to 'see' the

diverse realities that exist around them and imagine other, more inclusive ways of schooling. Leaders who are able to 'see' the inequity around them, and examine in a critical way the institutional and systemic measures that are allowing Mi'kmaw students to fail, will be able to use emancipatory leadership to create equity in education. They will be there for all children. These white educators will see the Mi'kmaw students as 'their' children and not 'other' people's children (Delpit, 1996). As Enid Lee (1998) states they will do equity work – and that means whatever is necessary to get everyone to the 'same place.'

Dolly Prosper,<sup>2</sup> the sole Mi'kmaw representative on an all-white school board who has fought for many years for meaningful education for the children in her community, sums it up most eloquently. When asked pointedly by white school board members what her community wanted for Mi'kmaw students, she replied in her quiet but powerful and passionate voice. "All we want for our kids is what you want for your kids – we just want them to succeed in school." When we can all see what Dolly sees, it will NOT mean that the diversity and the uniqueness between us have disappeared. However when we can all see what Dolly sees, certainly the distance between us will have started to disappear.

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#### NOTES

1. Marjorie Googoo is a member of the Wagmatcook First Nation and is the principal of the band-operated school in that community.
2. Dolly Prosper is a band counselor and member of the Afton First Nation and has worked tirelessly on the education portfolio in her community for years.

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