

# SEEKING STRENGTH-BASED APPROACHES IN ABORIGINAL EDUCATION: THE "THREE STARS AND A WISH" PROJECT

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**ABSTRACT.** In a writing project, Aboriginal parents chose and told stories from their lives to their children, grade five students at an inner city school. The children recorded the stories, which were compiled in a book. At a public book launch, the authors read excerpts from their work. Themes from six stories are analyzed and discussed in relation to criteria that promote a strength-based approach to Aboriginal education.

**À LA RECHERCHE D'APPROCHES FORTES DANS L'ENSEIGNEMENT DES  
AUTOCHTONES : LE PROJET "TROIS ÉTOILES ET UN VOEU"**

**RÉSUMÉ.** Pour un projet de production écrite, des parents autochtones ont choisi des histoires inspirées de leurs expériences. Ils les ont racontées à des enfants de 5<sup>ème</sup> année d'une école du centre-ville. Les enfants ont enregistré ces histoires et les ont rassemblées pour en constituer un livre. Lors du lancement public de ce livre, les auteurs en ont lu des extraits. Les thèmes de six histoires ont été analysés et sont présentés en fonction des critères favorisant une approche fondée sur les forces des apprenants autochtones.

## INTRODUCTION

McCluskey (1988) has demonstrated the potential of Aboriginal students to use writing to deal with issues of importance in their lives. He administered the Verbal segment of the Torrance Tests of Creative Thinking to Aboriginal students on a northern reserve and analysed the responses. One exercise required students to respond in writing to the following question: "Just suppose clouds had strings attached to them that hang down to earth. What would happen?"

Students in the early years (grades 1-4) wrote:

"Robbers would make their hideouts in the clouds (if they could build a foundation)."

"I could cut string to make bows."

“Suicide jumpers would have something aside from buildings to use.”

“Of course, the government would tax the strings.”

“If there were strings attached to clouds, some good people all over the world would climb up. Then the sky people would evolve. They would have no crime, no cars, no pollution, and no government. It would be a superior race and perfect world. The lower class masses of people would stay on the earth to supply food and water to the people in the sky.”

A common thread in these brief “stories” is the everyday challenges that preoccupy Aboriginal children, including violence, suicide, hunting, omnipotent government (The Indian Act), and continuity and change. In addition to demonstrating creativity, these students show that when given the opportunity, they will use writing to explore the meaning of the world around them. In the pages that follow we discuss the ways in which certain kinds of writing activities allow students to celebrate their strengths. These activities have excellent results which contradict the common view of Aboriginal students as performing poorly in mainstream schooling. After discussing the literature on the negative view of Aboriginal student performance, we describe the project, its context and its participants, and discuss the project’s positive results for the students and their families, teachers, and community.

#### *Concerns with academic performance.*

The sensitivity and insight revealed in these students’ writing stands in contrast to what we know about the struggles of Aboriginal children and youth in schools. In many Canadian jurisdictions, large numbers of Aboriginal students do not become successful readers and writers. Aboriginal academic performance is also a widespread concern in the U.S.A. For example, current trends suggest that the scores of Native students on the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) and the American College Testing (ACT) Program are significantly lower than those of the general population (Hillabrant, Romano, Stang, & Charleston, 1992).

In one Manitoba school in 1996, although about 10% of the 700 students were Aboriginal, less than 4% finished grade 12. Of the 23 Native youth who had entered that system in kindergarten, only 1 completed high school. In the same year in another district, only 1 of 25 students who had transferred from northern reserves graduated (McCluskey, et al., 2000). Of grade 7 students entering a predominantly Aboriginal city high school in September 1998, 17% were tested as reading at or above grade level. Fifty-five percent were tested as reading three or more years below current grade placement. Twenty-nine percent were found to be four or more instructional reading levels below grade placement, or at grade 3 or lower reading level. Not surprisingly, in Winnipeg, the school dropout rate is far higher for Aboriginal than for non-Aboriginal youth. While 19.5% (10,415) of non-

Aboriginal youth leave school early, 50.3% (3490) of Aboriginals drop out (cf. Social Planning Council of Winnipeg, 1999).

According to Reynolds (1992), poor scores by Aboriginal students on culturally unfair tests have resulted in widespread adoption of a deficit model of education that emphasises weaknesses instead of strengths. Tonemah (1992) asserts that schools typically “cope” with Native children and youth by focusing primarily on remedial efforts, rather than looking at what they are doing and can do. Callahan and McIntire (1994) state that even high-ability Native students often have very little chance to develop their gifts.

Some Aboriginal students suggest that members of the dominant culture often do not understand the subtleties of what they are saying. Aboriginal students often have different interpretations of everyday school occurrences (First Nations Educational Council, 1999). Many Aboriginal people do not embrace the structured, mechanistic Western worldview that emphasizes hypotheses, theories, and laws (Kawagley, 1990). Not surprisingly, while many people see education as an important route to success, some First Nations groups have concluded that no effective working models exist for Aboriginal education in the mainstream system.

Research (for example, Colorado, 1988; Snively, 1995; Sutherland, 1999) suggests that bridging the cultural gap between mainstream schooling and Aboriginal children and youth can be accomplished through programs and activities which pay attention to a combination of factors. These (1) use storytelling or critical incidents to encourage students to express their opinions, reflect on their learning, evaluate alternatives, and justify their choices; (2) are experiential; (3) involve a high degree of student participation, and integrate purposeful listening, reading, speaking, and problem solving; (4) relate to their daily lives and experiences; (5) employ cooperative learning; (6) build on student strengths; and (7) utilize teaching strategies of demonstration, modelling, practice, and feedback.

### THREE STARS AND A WISH

Wheeler (2001) describes the modern Canadian Aboriginal experience as a torturous re-emergence from colonization, in which “a lot of work has to be done in front of mirrors.” In the *Three Stars and a Wish* writing project, we found that biographical and autobiographical writing were excellent mirrors for helping Aboriginal students and their parents to address in a positive and constructive way these difficult, hurtful experiences that could not, in the normal course of daily family and community life, be addressed directly. Students and parents validated their experiences and, through their writing, achieved success in school in Aboriginal terms.

### *Biography and autobiography*

There is a recognition in the literature of the challenges posed by teaching writing in school, even for experienced teachers. Of equal importance in addressing the needs of Aboriginal students is the challenge of preparing student teachers to teach writing successfully (Grant & Secada, 1990; Gay, 1993; Hermann & Sarracino, 1993; Mavrogenes & Bezruczko, 1993; Bowie, 1996; Cruz, 1997; Artiles & McAffery, 1998; Zeicher, Grant, et al., 1998; Howey, 1999; James-Wilson, 1999; Grossman, et al., 2000; McFalls & Cobb-Roberts, 2001). The approaches that are documented in the literature do not involve grappling with relevance through the combination of elements we adopted: taking the writing process out of the classroom and into the community; involving parents in the process; and focusing on autobiographical writing. The *Three Stars and a Wish* project used an approach to mobilizing these ideas and exploring them in practice that is, as far as we know, unique.

We agreed upon a collaborative biographical writing approach because it allowed us, to differing degrees, and in addition to the factors noted above, to meet several other conditions that have been identified as critical attributes of meaningful learning in high poverty school situations and for Aboriginal students. These include de-emphasizing discrete language mechanics skills and mechanical correctness, teaching the writing process, connecting writing to students' backgrounds, and most notably, changing the social context of the writing task (Needels, 1999).

Researchers, among them Gale (1994), have found that the personal story is a valuable tool in the development of self-knowledge. Biography and autobiography point toward an author's ability to make sense of his or her own experiences and to understand their significance to him or herself and to others. Autobiographical writing is also often employed as a first writing approach when working with marginally literate adults. It is a powerful way to help adult learners begin the job of learning to read and write in a way that helps them to locate themselves in the world, and in the process, make sense of that world. In the context of elementary schooling, this autobiography can start with the recording of parents' stories. "Speaking the experience" offers children and parents the evaluative context that is the starting point for comprehending one's life and the value of writing as a tool of self-understanding.

Davis (1987) states that the personal attitudes of a writing teacher can have a greater impact on student writing than his or her pedagogical approaches. Concern for an individual writer's development, understanding the flexibility of language, and a desire to de-emphasize grades, rules and rigid format facilitate better student attitudes toward writing. These attitudes are closely

allied with a student teacher's confidence in him- or herself as a teacher of writing.

Moffett (1979) urges us to have students working collaboratively with partners and coaches, engaging in a practical, real world activity in a rich physical and social interaction with the things of this world. He viewed these conditions as necessary to the development of the "revision of inner speech". We chose biographical and autobiographical writing as the focus of activity for all of these reasons.

### *The setting*

The neighbourhood in which the project took place is in Winnipeg, but in many ways seems like a refugee camp in an impoverished country. The neighbourhood is pervaded by a sense of isolation. It is in the city, but does not seem a part of it. It is small in area, easily understood as an urban feature but without a clear identity. The people who live in the community live close together yet are wary of each other.

This is a neighbourhood that can at the same time be labelled an inner city area and appear not to be so. The "official" inner city is slightly to the north of it. The community is separated from the inner city by urban borders: on the north and south, two rivers that converge to the east of the community, just beyond a six lane, divided north-south commuter route that is a double bridge where it passes the area. On the west, a curving arterial road that carries traffic from the bridge meets a four-lane road carrying traffic over a bridge from downtown, moving south to the suburbs. The two, parallel east-west streets in the neighbourhood are each one-ways and about 400 metres long. There are no single-family houses in this community. People live in the low-rise walk-ups that line the two streets. These buildings were constructed in the late 1940s and early 50s and most are in disrepair. The neighbourhood is given the greater part of its character by the modern school building and schoolyard, and the public housing project that occupies the rest of the area between the streets.

The people who live in the neighbourhood are almost all poor. Many residents are on welfare, others on immigrant allowances, others are working poor. Some are poor without hope, others poor but expecting better things. In the former group are many of the young, single Aboriginal mothers with infants and pre-school children who are the main occupants of the public housing project. The latter group are recent immigrants, including refugees from Bosnia, Iraq, and The People's Republic of China. The immigrants live in the walk-up apartments.

Transience and isolation are two features of individual life in this area. The young, single mothers who live in the public housing units have to deal with

unpredictable and often violent boyfriends, other mothers with whom they have arguments, and the drug dealers and users who infest the area. A year ago the school, police service, and provincial child and family service department made a concerted effort to rid the area of drug dealers, but the dealers have returned. The young mothers often respond to problems such as these by leaving for another area, or returning to their reserve. For the immigrants, this is usually a first stop in their Canadian experience. When they can afford to, they leave. The experiences of most of the people here regardless of origin seem to leave them isolated and alone. The first author attended two community events sponsored by the school – a naming ceremony, and a spaghetti supper to kick off the *Three Stars and a Wish* Writing project – and was struck by how alone most individuals remained in the midst of the social activity. Young mothers staked out a spot for themselves and their infant, and attended to the baby throughout the activity, never joining in. The immigrants would retreat to silent watching. Few people spoke; most waited. In spite of these efforts, there is no community league, or any organization to recruit parent volunteers and offer sports, crafts, and dance, for the children in the community.

The school has made minor inroads into this learned helplessness. There is a soccer skills program that has been organized through the school and a local university. The school runs a daycare, and the school staff, led by a dedicated, experienced principal provides excellent education. The school sponsored an Aboriginal Naming Ceremony, and a community celebration to welcome the end of the school year. There is little parental involvement in child and youth related activities, and efforts to engage parents have thus far been unsuccessful in most respects, with the exception of the *Three Stars and A Wish* writing project.

It would be inaccurate and unfair to assert that relations in the community are irredeemable. The relations between the Aboriginal and immigrant elements of the community are often pleasant and friendly, particularly between the women, and especially when they are jointly involved in a community project. One such project was the creation of a database of community interests, goals, and resources to be made available to all community members with the aim of broadening the base of community decision-making and speeding up the process of project implementation (Katz & Davies, 2001). Women from Iraq, Kurdistan, Winnipeg, and northern Manitoba reserves collaborated with the authors to create a survey instrument, and, in cross-cultural pairs canvassed 78% of the community for their responses. In the community, both inside and outside of school, the children mingle without distinction as to origin. As more incubators of community organization are implemented, the possibility of community mobilization may grow.

*Students, student teachers, and researchers*

Often, in inner city schools, student teachers and the children they teach, the students' parents, and those of us who research their experiences live in very different worlds. Hunter (2000), a former inner city school principal, captured the essence of inner city childhood. She wrote:

They spend their childhood in substandard housing where heat, light and water may be absent. They often are not adequately clothed. They are often cold. They face scarcity of food. They lack safe recreation opportunities, sports equipment, music lessons, fun clubs like Brownies and Cubs. There is a dearth of community club facilities, community hockey, soccer, and baseball leagues. They have to learn, as best they can, to adjust to the cyclical life events of having money and not having money, of having food and of having none left, of having a safe place to live and having it turn unsafe. Children and adults are killed by drunken drivers or at drinking parties, youth and adults are charged or imprisoned, apprehended, put in foster care, parents go missing, people don't come home at night, people die in house fires, girls and women are assaulted, brutalized (pp.111-112).

Sometimes, the banality of the problem makes it almost transparent. For example, an inner city soccer skills program to improve self-worth and school achievement fails to attract even one Aboriginal student in the local school. Although some students turn out for the first session, their level of fitness is low and they labour to do the most basic activities. They do not return.

In many Canadian provinces, particularly west of Ontario, educational issues of cross-cultural diversity and poverty focus primarily but not exclusively on Aboriginal students, many of whom, increasingly, live in the city and, in particular, in inner city neighbourhoods. Manitoba's Aboriginal population is growing at a much faster rate than its non-Aboriginal population. By 2016, the Aboriginal population will probably be over 192,000 or about 20% of the population of the province, up by over 60,000 – or 49% – from 1996 numbers. By 2016, one in five employable adults in Manitoba will be Aboriginal, yet, in 1999, 5% of Aboriginal people aged 17 or older had graduated from high school. The birth rate among the Aboriginal population is four times the rate of the general population, and the average age of the First Nations population is low. In the next decade, a growing percentage of Manitoba's student population will be Aboriginal (Native Education Directorate, School Programs Division, 2000). Trends in Saskatchewan and Alberta are similar.

What are the socio-economic conditions and opportunities currently available to these young people and their families? Forty-seven percent of inner city residents earn less than \$20,000.00/year compared with 24% in the rest of the city (Loxley, 2000). Thirty-one percent of all Aboriginal adults

reported reliance on social assistance payments in 1990 compared with 6.3% of the general population of the city (cf. Loxley, 1993). Two-thirds of respondents reported this reliance lasted more than 6 months. In a survey of 144 inner city households (Loxley, 1993), 67% of Aboriginal respondents reported that welfare was their main source of household income, compared with 44% of other inner city residents. The net result is that the incidence of poverty among Aboriginal people in Winnipeg is very high – and much higher than the average for the city (Loxley, 2000).

Our student teachers present a very different profile, one that conforms to what we generally know about those people who choose to become teachers in Canada. They are very different from the students whom they will one day teach. Student teachers tend to be predominantly female, young, raised in lower-middle and middle/middle class suburban homes, and are mainly white, and mainstream in their ethnic and cultural affiliations.

Fifteen student teachers from the university participated in the Writing Project. Within broad limits, they were representative of the population from which they were selected. Twelve were in the third year of a four-year degree program. Two were in their certification year. One student was unregistered. There were fewer males than in the third year population. Thirteen were female two were male (13.3% vs. 19% overall). They were slightly younger than the population of third year students. Fourteen were under 23 years of age (93% vs. 80% overall). For one student, the program represented a second career. Relatively, there were fewer participants who were married and thus involved in demanding relationships outside of schooling. Two were married and mothers (13.3% vs. 17% overall). Although the numbers are very small, they were clearly a more culturally mainstream group than the population of third year B.Ed. students of which they were a part (6.66% vs. 10%): with one exception, all were native speakers of English; all were Canadian citizens; there were no visible minorities or any Aboriginal students among the participants. One student had immigrated to Canada from a Middle Eastern country but had lived from a young age in the US before coming to Canada. In all respects, the group was representative of the majority of teacher candidates in Canadian teacher education programs.

As authors, we came to this project within the context of a larger, federally funded venture that subsumed a number of initiatives. These included a student and university-mentoring program, and a storefront community literacy program to work with young Aboriginal mothers and their infants in the public housing to develop home strategies to support emergent literacy. Both of us had considerable experience working in inner city and Aboriginal settings. We were focused more on pursuing particular issues of social justice in the community than on generalizing from the experience.

In this context, we were able to stimulate, recognize, and seize the opportunity to pursue the writing project opening that emerged in talk with the school principal and the grade 5 teacher, and successfully mobilize parental involvement. This success was in large part because we were spending a lot of time in the community, were known to many people in it, and were open in expressing our purposes and our enthusiasm. That enthusiasm was not for the research – that was of secondary importance to us – but for the parents' stories, community development, and in the case of the student teachers, the help of the families in making them better teachers.

### *The project*

One root of the *Three Stars and a Wish* project was the first author's approach to teacher education. The site-based approach grew out of bringing children to the university during summer semester so that student teachers could develop theory from practice through course work that included one-on-one remedial sessions with struggling readers. This evolved into site-based teaching in inner city schools. In this format, the course work and one-on-one sessions were preserved, and the whole course was taught in an inner city school with the overall aim of engaging student teachers with the significant needs of inner city children learning to read. Thus, the project began as part of an elective senior undergraduate course in Teaching Writing in the Early and Middle Years.

The other root of the project was in the meeting between a grade 5 teacher at the school and the first author. At the suggestion of the school principal, we met to discuss ways in which the university education students could become involved in writing with students in the class. The teacher was determined to midwife a student-written book before he retired, and having tried unsuccessfully twice before, was wary, yet passionately interested.

We asked the grade 5 students and their parents to work together to write about incidents that the parent chose as illustrations of what they felt were important in their lives. The incidents that they chose would be ones that they felt would provide guidance for their children. Additionally, parents were asked to prepare one important wish for their children's future.

Student teachers were assigned to act as dual facilitators. First, they would help the parents develop their stories; for example, guiding them to fill in their stories with greater detail. Second, they would scaffold the children's writing of the story, from handwriting to grammar, spelling, and conventions. Participation in the project was one part of the student teachers' course responsibilities. In addition to their work with parents and children, we met twice each week for 160 minutes as a class at the university. Class time included a focus on curriculum delivery structures and programs such

as Writers' Workshop, journaling, and spelling, and a debriefing and sharing of experiences about their work with individual students and their families.

The role of parents as sources of knowledge and information – as resources – was implicit in the purpose of the writing activity. However, we felt that if the project was to help Aboriginal students be successful in their writing, and the biographies were to have power, it was crucial to ensure that the parent/child relationship was the strongest in the triad. To do this, we felt that it would be necessary to establish that parents were resources, not clients.

In mid-January, all the participants were invited to a spaghetti supper in the gym of the school. Parents and their children were introduced to the student teacher with whom they would work. Eating together can be fertile ground in which to plant friendships and that is what happened that evening. There was much rushing about, as the first author, his wife, his grown son visiting from another city, a teaching assistant, the dean of the faculty, the school secretary, and a parent advisory council member cooked the supper. With the help of grade 5 students, we served it to the attendees. One of the grade 5 students commented that it was the best party he had ever been to. As she was leaving that night, a parent described it as "like a country wedding". In addition to being great fun, the spaghetti supper served to bring together the participants in a non-school, friendly activity in which all were equal. The adult parents, in particular, held a privileged place by virtue of being the parents, and their role demanded that the younger student teachers treat them with respect that is not normally accorded by teachers to parents. It was a fine beginning.

The triads were given a deadline of the end of March to prepare finished drafts of the autobiographies. They were asked to meet at least three times during that period to complete the task. We encouraged groups to meet in the family home to reinforce the integrated, purposeful character of the activity, and to give the parent a strong opportunity to model and demonstrate literacy to the child. Alternate arrangements were made to accommodate these meetings at the school if necessary.

Parents and student teachers reported that a consistent pattern emerged in the process of creating the autobiographical sketches. Most of the meetings took place in the family homes, in part because parents were busy during the day. The early evening, when the school was closed, was often the most convenient time to meet. Possibly, the demands of autobiography also involved surroundings that were more secure and broader than would be suggested by the school and the generally unsatisfactory school experiences of many of the parents. Initially, many of the grade five students showed the same lack of interest in writing at home as they did in writing at school. In

short order, however, their interest was piqued and they became immersed in the stories that their parents were telling.

Events with the power to transform understanding and personality have common characteristics. They are tangible, and reach beyond the confines of one group, preferably to embrace a public validation of individual and group experience in an unambiguous way (Csikszentmihalyi & Hermanson, 1995). In this instance, the stories were put together in a book. The grade 5 students who participated in the project prepared artwork for the cover and a title for the book. They chose the cover design and title that they preferred. In titling the book *Three Stars and a Wish*, the students wanted to highlight the three main participants, parents, student teachers, and themselves. *The Wish* refers to the wish for his or her child's future that every parent included with the story.

In mid-May, all participants gathered in the university's performing arts hall, before an audience of community members, teachers, student teachers, university faculty, politicians, and school board and university administrators, and launched their careers as authors. They read excerpts from what they had written. Thus was born *Three Stars and a Wish* (Katz, 2000), a book in which the family stories were presented, together with illustrations of family mementos that were related to the stories. The University of Winnipeg published the book. Each participant, and their school received copies directly from the university president, at the book launch.

## METHOD AND PROCEDURES

Of the sixteen stories in *Three Stars and a Wish*, Aboriginal children and their parents wrote six. We took the stories that were created as the effort of child and parent – mediated by a student teacher – to assign meaning to their lives. Within this broad description, we wanted to know how they accomplished this. We organized, read, notated, coded, and attempted to interpret the stories, providing a detailed descriptive context in which to understand how meaning was created. Constant comparison and negative case analysis were employed to gain insight, discern thematic patterns, and give interpretive shape to the results (Gay & Airasian, 2000).

The project had its impetus in a university course designed to help student teachers learn how to support growth in student writing in schools. We had hoped that the *Three Stars and a Wish* project would encourage the student teachers to begin to see the possibilities of situating purposeful writing in a family, community, and change-oriented context. To what degree and in what ways, if any, did the student teachers feel themselves to have changed as a result of this experience? To gather data to begin answering these questions, the student teachers were interviewed at length, individually and

in small groups. They were asked to recount their involvement in the writing project in terms of what they did and their feelings as they were engaged in the project, what they observed about the relationship between parents and children, and what they learned about the teaching of writing that they might implement in their own classroom.

Because the writing project was more limited in time and scope than a full teacher education program, selected aspects of Melnick and Zeicher's (1998) criteria to assess student teacher progress in an Urban Education Program were used as a guideline in analysing student teacher responses. QSR N5 qualitative analysis software was used to code and analyse the stories and the taped transcripts of interviews with student teachers for patterns, topics, and themes.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

That child and parent would create a commonly acceptable reading of the past is almost a foregone conclusion, given that the project invited this kind of product. But what would be dealt with, and how would parents and children handle the topics that they raised? At the most general level, taken together, the stories reflect a constructive, positive approach to confronting some issues that are particular to and particularly difficult for Aboriginal people to address. Here are the themes that emerged:

**THE PARENT IS A STRONG, JUST PERSON.** An important and prominent part of the acceptable past that the parents and children created is the presentation of the parent as someone to be looked up to. We believe that this is a significant step for Aboriginal students to take using writing. Aboriginal adults and children are beset by pervasive stereotypes that cast them as helpless and unreliable. To carry an image of a parent as one who does valuable things for others is a powerful antidote to these racist stereotypes. In one story, G writes of his mother as a ballet dancer. She was an outdoors type of person who ice fished in winter and sang and danced with friends in the park in summer. She found an arrowhead that was so valuable that the museum kept it. The circle is seen to be complete when the child finds that she now lives in the same townhouse project where her mom came to visit friends when she was young. In a second story, the mother – as a youngster – breaks her collarbone washing clothes in an old fashioned washing machine. She misses Halloween, but is sure not to miss school. In all the stories, the parent deals with a challenge in a calm and exemplary way.

**THE STORIES HAVE CONSTRUCTIVE MESSAGES.** Often, we teach our children and ourselves by infusing our stories with a moral. Traditionally, in Judeo-Christian culture, morality plays instructed community members on how to translate values into restrained behaviour, usually by painting a vivid pic-

ture of the hellish consequences of transgressing these values. Today, our newspapers fill this role. However, in the tradition of Aboriginal storytelling, the listener (or reader) must work to create his or her meaning, as if recognizing the mirror-like process alluded to by Wheeler (2001), that is captured in the talmudic insight that what we see is not what is but who we are. These stories offer gentle doses of morality. In one story a mother shows that she is not only compassionate, but also can make “the right choice”:

In grade seven one of my mom’s math classmates, J, was spitting in my mom’s hair, scribbling in her textbook and on her math papers. J was embarrassing my mom and making her angry. Mom was shocked that J would spit in her hair in class. At the end of the day, my mom’s teacher gave mom a choice to go to a different class because J was always bugging her. Mom decided to go to the other class to get away from J.

Five months later J came to the class where mom and her friend M were. J had also bugged M in another class. J had no friends in her new class so she went up to my mom and M and said, “Hi,” hoping that mom and M would be her friends. After school, M and my mom talked about being J’s friend and decided to forgive her and give her another chance. J ended up sharing a locker with mom and M, and they all became friends.

The lesson my mom wanted me to learn from this story is that life is full of choices and you don’t always have to choose to treat people the way that you were treated. Sometimes it is okay to make a different and better choice.

The values that these stories convey are positive and constructive ones. E’s story about a broken collarbone concludes with the observation that she missed Halloween, but not school. A common moral thread in the stories is that the parent made a strong decision, and the word “decision” figures prominently in five of the six stories. In one story the stepfather decides to go home before it gets dark. In a second story, the child decides to give the arrowhead to her teacher. In a third story the mother decides to move to a different class. In another story, the family decides to move so the child can go to school. In a fifth story, the grandmother decides to become a foster parent. The morality expressed in these stories is not one in which teaching is done through showing the consequences of bad behaviour, but through emphasizing the positive.

A characteristic of colonized peoples is a feeling of helplessness, and it is often this sense of helplessness that is viewed as passivity and dysfunction by Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people. In these stories, however, the parent is one who seizes the day, and solves the problem by making a decision.

**CHANGE AND CONTINUITY: REMEMBERING THE PAST AND SHAPING THE FUTURE.** Aboriginal individuals and communities are caught between a past that was taken rather than voluntarily given up, and a present and future for which

there seem to be few acceptable choices. A prominent theme in these stories is continuity and change, as focused on three experiences that are widespread among Aboriginal people: Foster Care, the move from the reserve to the city, and white stepparents. This is the story that C told to R, her grandchild, who recorded it:

My grandma was put in a foster home when she was 10. . . Before. . . she lived with her grandparents. My grandma was put in a good foster home so she felt lucky. . . other kids had bad experiences.

When she moved in with her foster parents, she had all kinds of new foods. . . KFC, French fries, sandwich meat, ham and pork chops all for the first time. . . [she] thought that the pork chops were bland [and] weird with apple sauce. Now she is a foster parent because she likes kids. . . she has had six foster kids and five of her own.

An important element in R's grandmother's story is the experience of non-Aboriginal culture and society. In this case, this experience is encircled by another common experience of Aboriginal children, foster care. What R's grandmother offers her here are two elements that are often missing in what we can give Aboriginal children like R. These are hope, an example of strength, and a goal and motivator. The strength, determination, and purposefulness of the grandmother pulses in this story. The project and process animated these possibilities.

**MOVING FROM THE RESERVE TO THE CITY.** Until the 1970's few Aboriginal people in Manitoba lived in the city; most lived on reserves in the northern or southern parts of the province. Many reserves were inaccessible except by plane, or, at certain times of year by winter road. Now, migration from reserve to city is a common experience for Aboriginal people in the province. A generation of Aboriginal children has grown up with little knowledge of the impact that this move had on their parents. E has had the opportunity to learn this, as he shows here.

Once there was a little girl named R. She went to school in the 60s on the reserve. The reserve is much different from today. There was no electricity. They had to use gas lamps for light and wood stoves for cooking. There were no phones and . . . television. There was no high school. They sent the high school students away for the whole year. Her family moved to [the city] so she didn't have to leave home.

When my mom first got to [the city], she couldn't believe how many stores there were. She lost count. There were too many. . . She found everything different – like the streets lights . . . there were no streets on the reserve. She could not believe how big her school was. My school today is a lot different from hers before.

The difficulties and differences in life that E's mother experienced as a result of this move are strongly hinted at in the story. Many Aboriginal students leave the schools that they are sent away to attend because of the differences and the distance from family. Through their creation of this series of events in his mother's life, E has been able to acknowledge the difference between the traditional and modern life without creating a resentful or unhappy interpretation. In the last line of the story he links his mother's experience to his own.

Aboriginal people must negotiate a non-Aboriginal world in which they often feel resentful and dispossessed. N deals with this relationship at its most intimate, in trying to understand his white stepfather, a Newfoundlander:

It was 28 years ago and J's dad just got home from work. It is a warm August evening. Around six o'clock J's family, [go] to pick berries. J and his mom and dad and his three little brothers get into their little four-door car. J is 11 . . . When they get there they will walk for a mile picking berries, storing them in their ice cream pail.

Sometimes, when J's bucket gets full he will use his t-shirt to hold his berries. J and his three brothers. . . go play on the side of a hill. Berries grow everywhere, even on the side of the hill where J is playing. It is becoming dark so they decide to go home to clean the berries.

J thinks that cleaning the berries is very neat! He will only pick the best ones because they are going to be sold. J will sell them to the buyer who will resell the berries to the grocery stores. His parents will use the money to buy schoolbooks, school clothes and runners for the kids.

Now, 28 years later, when J returns to Newfoundland the area where he picked berries is a housing development. J remembers the berry picking days.

In addition to jointly creating a picture of a very human boy, not a stereotype – one with whom N, an Aboriginal child – can empathise, N also sees, in the last sentence, how J, a non-Aboriginal, deals with transition and continuity as he reflects on the inevitable change that has overtaken his berry picking area and his childhood memories.

Student teacher responses to interview questions were analyzed in terms of consciousness of oneself, attentiveness to others, and understanding of the cultural dimensions of people's lives (Melnick & Zeicher, 1998). Three categories of response to their project experiences were discernible, consistently, across the analytic categories. Some student teachers' responses suggested that they remained classroom and curriculum focused. A second set of responses could be characterized as classroom and curriculum based, but with a strong element of awareness of parents as resources that could be deployed in the classroom. The third set of responses suggested that some of the student teachers had begun to appreciate the relationship between

effective teaching of and learning to write and the possibilities afforded by family and community involvement to make writing socially purposeful. Although untested and unexplored, there appeared to be a relationship between this last category and distance from a mainstream upbringing. Student teachers whose background was not stereotypically Canadian were more apt to be sympathetic to going beyond classroom and curriculum in search of effective writing instruction.

## CONCLUSIONS

A major challenge in Aboriginal education is to help Aboriginal students retain their cultural identity, while at the same time preparing them for life in a complex, non-Aboriginal and homogenizing world. Principles adopted by the Indian Nations at Risk Task Force (1991) in the U.S. emphasize that schools must strive to provide enriching curricula and opportunities for Aboriginal young people. The character of the stories in the *Three Stars and A Wish Writing Project* suggests that inviting Aboriginal parents to join in partnership with educators in a purposeful and meaningful activity goes a long way down that road.

A promising response to meeting the needs of Aboriginal students may lie in recruiting and preparing more teacher candidates from among urban Aboriginal people (as Sletter (2000) has suggested in relation to the poor and minority groups in the inner city, in general). The responses of the student teachers to their experiences in the *Three Stars and a Wish* project support this view.

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