

"There Is No Way to Prepare for This": Teaching in First Nations Schools in Northern Ontario—Issues and Concerns

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This article reports on a qualitative study of 10 female teachers working in two First Nations fly-in communities in northern Ontario. The issues or concerns of these teachers are grouped into five themes: (a) pedagogical goals and purposes; (b) relationship to the community; (c) living in the North; (d) teaching in the North; and (e) teacher education. The findings suggest that more intensive preservice and inservice teacher education programs that focus on the relationship of teachers to First Nations communities and to cross-cultural and multicultural teaching with particular reference to the teaching of English as a second language are needed to prepare educators better for work in the North. The article concludes with a series of questions intended to provoke further discussion of, and more critical planning for, the professional development of teachers employed in remote northern communities.

This article reports on a qualitative study of female teachers working in two remote First Nations communities in northern Ontario. The study explored the professional and personal experiences of 10 women and how their experiences speak to current teacher preservice and inservice education. This study is part of a larger research project that investigates the historical and contemporary circumstances of white and Aboriginal women teaching in northern Canada and their role in and preparation for minority and multicultural education. The intention of such research is to improve the preparation of teachers for work in Aboriginal education; and more generally, for any teacher concerned with issues of social justice and equity in an increasingly diverse Canada. This initial study indicates a number of issues and concerns that female teachers and their communities face in organizing and delivering more effective First Nations education.¹

Over the last 20 years there has been an increasing demand for improvement in the schooling of First Nations children. The current educational system and its teachers are viewed by many as having failed to prepare children for life either in northern communities or in Canada more generally (Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples [RCAP], 1996). Moreover, the educational system, among other social institutions, bears much responsibility for the loss of Aboriginal languages and cultures in what is seen as the continued subjugation of First Nations people. The efforts of First Nations communities to change this situation have resulted in greater local control over curriculum and school policy, in the ongoing development of alternative teaching and administrative strategies, in the documentation of current and historical experiences of schooling, and on recovering the history and traditional philosophy of Aboriginal education (Milloy, 1999; Tompkins, 1998; Haig-Brown, 1997; Fiske, 1996; Battiste & Barman, 1995; Chisholm, 1994; Johnston, 1988; Wyatt, 1979). This study attempts to add to these efforts by exploring the

experiences of women who continue to make up most of the educators in the North in efforts to target areas where preservice and inservice education can be improved.²

For purposes of this study *the North* refers to the districts and communities with predominantly First Nations populations found in the three territories (Yukon, Northwest Territories, and Nunavut) and northern parts of the provinces of British Columbia, Alberta, Saskatchewan, Manitoba, Ontario, Quebec, and Newfoundland. The communities in this area tend to be small, remote, and resource-based. To date there has been no systematic study of the experiences of female teachers who have worked in the North. There are a number of historical studies of female teachers generally, but this scholarship has not addressed the northern experience specifically (Prentice & Theobald, 1991; Heap & Prentice, 1991). There are a number of journalistic reports, biographical accounts, and government publications about teachers who have worked in the North (Trolley, 1998; Jacobs, 1995; "Sad Lessons," 1993; Macpherson, 1991; Hinds, 1958), but only a limited number of research studies concerning teachers in northern Canada (Tompkins, 1998; Stairs, 1995). My research specifically concerns women teaching in the North; this particular study focuses on women who were teaching in two remote First Nations communities in northern Ontario in the mid 1990s.

The study required teachers to reflect on their current experiences teaching in northern Ontario in relation to their teacher education program. Of the 10 women who participated seven were first-year teachers and three were experienced teachers; eight were Caucasian, one was of South Asian ancestry, and one was an Aboriginal teacher.³ The Aboriginal teacher was not originally from the community and like the other teachers interviewed did not speak Cree, the first language of her students. All the teachers were from southern Ontario and with one exception had only limited experience of life in the North before their teaching appointment. Collectively, the women had received their teacher education from five universities: four in Ontario and one in New York State. Five of the teachers had taken courses in Native education in their preservice teacher education program, five had not.

Each of the teachers participated in at least one formal interview supported by informal conversations. The formal interviews often lasted an hour or more. The teachers were interviewed in the communities in which they were teaching. The two fly-in communities were located in the sparsely populated Hudson Bay lowlands where most of the population is Cree-speaking. Both communities had a long history of white contact. Both had had church and later federally controlled education, but now had local band control over their schools. By southern standards the schools appeared to be pleasant places, well maintained and well equipped, educating students from pre-kindergarten through to high school. The curriculum included Native studies. In both communities most of the teachers were white women from southern Canada.

A number of themes emerged from the interviews. It is important to note in reviewing these themes that this was a small study of only 10 teachers who were interviewed once or at most twice. Although the teachers shared freely and generously the thoughts and reflections foremost in their minds at the time, the

genealogy of these ideas, and their subsequent development were not addressed. In short, this initial study reflects a moment frozen in time and place. Nonetheless, the themes resonate so profoundly across participants and with other studies that I believe they demand attention and raise important questions for teacher educators to consider.

Five interrelated themes emerged: (a) defining pedagogical goals and purposes; (b) relationship to the community; (c) living in the North; (d) teaching in the North; and (e) teacher education.

Defining Pedagogical Goals and Purposes

In the interviews first-year teachers in particular expressed a great deal of uncertainty about the nature and purpose of schooling for Aboriginal students. Determining pedagogical goals and purposes was difficult, as indicated by one first-year teacher who asked in exasperation:

What am I supposed to do here? I kept asking ... What's my goal? Is my goal to prepare them [the students] for life on the reserve or is my goal to prepare them for white life off the reserve? Do I prepare them to go into a job or do I prepare them to follow their family's traditions and "be" in the traditional way? Which there doesn't seem to be [a traditional way of life]. There is a mission statement in our book about respecting your culture, respecting other cultures and respecting yourself and the Elders, but that doesn't tell me what my goal is.

With no background in the social and political history of struggle by First Nations peoples to secure self-determination and the recovery or maintenance of Aboriginal cultures and languages, this teacher could not make sense of the education she was to provide. Her talk reflects the kind of goals-and-purposes discussion that often takes place in faculties of education rather than a focus on the process of developing a pedagogy with First Nations communities.

Many teachers showed their confusion about goals and purposes most clearly in their comments concerning English-language education. One teacher emphasized, "I realize we're educating them in [or for?] white society. But I'm sorry in this day and age, that's where it's at. If they want to go to college or university to further their education, they have to learn English." In contrast to this, another teacher commented, "Really, though, I'm not sure that they ever will need English. They're never going to leave this community. They know that they're never going to leave this community, so why would they ever need it?" Another acknowledged with some anguish the problem of English altering Cree:

English slips into the language and starts altering it ... Words are being lost. English is a not solely responsible for this, I hope, but it is a major contributor to this loss and to a loss of culture ... Why am I teaching English here? I have come to the resolution that students need English in order to protect themselves [from the government policies] ... So if I am going to teach English, how do I do so in the least harmful ways? How do I do that?

Obviously the purposes, goals, development of Aboriginal education, including language instruction are not going to be, nor should they be, determined by first-year teachers from the south. It is an issue for local band-run schools and their communities, along with larger provincial and national Aboriginal organizations to work through, and a number of available documents indicate current directions,

for example, the RCAP (1996). But these teachers, like many other educators, are evidently unaware of these documents or of the history that informs them. They seem to be working in a void, without a sense of the larger picture and processes from which to frame a sense of themselves and their work. It may be true that first-year teachers generally struggle with the purposes and parameters of teaching and learning. Nonetheless, the current social and political climate in the North makes the struggle to define one's work much more acute, and in the interests of First Nations' students and their families much more important to configure with the community.

Relationship to the School and Community

Related to this problem of purpose and process, the teachers spoke of a need to organize and clarify their relationship both to the school and to the community. In the school, negotiating with administration was often difficult. Knowing when and how to ask and insist on support when necessary was an issue for some of the teachers. Understanding and negotiating the relationship between various administrative structures in the school and between the school and the community was also problematic. On a positive note, many of the teachers spoke of the quality, or at least of the importance, of collegial support in the school. The support provided by colleagues improved teachers' professional and personal lives. "When I got here, there were several other teachers I had gone to teachers' college with. It was all our first year and we knew each other so that it was a nice support system." However, one teacher offered a cautionary note, warning that this support system can become too insular: "Now I know that the teachers have little groups, and they isolate themselves ... They're very 'into' their own little groups."

Teachers with families said that their relationship with the community, in particular with other parents, was easier to forge. They felt more at home. On the other hand, female teachers without children spoke of being more isolated. The women believed that male teachers, single or otherwise, were more easily integrated into the community for cultural and social reasons. Men were more likely to be involved in outdoor sports, for example. Many of the teachers also mentioned that white women were not respected in class or in the community to the same degree as their male counterparts.

More generally, the teachers struggled with their positions in the community as outsiders, and for most of the teachers as white people from the south. For example, teachers struggled with how best to make use of their expertise. One first-year teacher after speaking about her role as a teacher commented:

I think they [the community] could use some help with environmental issues around here ... That's the other part of me—the environmental geographer that's saying, "What can I do to help these people?" but then I don't want to feel like the white person coming in and saving them ... maybe if I can get into a classroom where I'm teaching biology, I can show them. Explain to them, why you don't throw raw sewage into your river.

The teachers interviewed seemed cautious about their position as outsider:

I felt that I respected that fact that they were their own community and that I was an outsider and that I would try as hard as I could not to step over those lines; that I'm going to respect those lines ... I felt that it wasn't my place to be promoting social change in a

Native community, that that was up to them. I wasn't going to be nosing around, trying to change things. They hate people who do that.

To various degrees the teachers were uncomfortable with their status not only as outsider, but also as an outsider who would eventually leave the community. All the teachers indicated that they were not intending to stay. Most expected to leave their community soon, particularly if more jobs became available in the south. Most were struggling to find meaningful and positive roles for themselves, knowing as they did—as did the community—that they were transient. Indeed according to one teacher, *transient* was the term used in official documents to refer to the teachers in one community where turnover was particularly high. The teachers felt insulted by this term, but as one first-year teacher admitted, “My heart isn't totally here. I know that this is not permanent.” Another insisted emphatically that despite her transient status, she had a commitment to the community because of her children:

They [the community] probably see me as more or less transient. But you know I have a vested interest in the school from a parent's point of view. I have a vested interest in the community from a parent's point of view.

A woman who had taught in the community for some time acknowledged that the people were “willing to open up more and tell me things ... They'll never do that to that for a first- or second-year teacher.” Another spoke about caring for her students and admitted, “There's a lot of guilt associated with leaving here ... I could never promise continuity for them. Probably a lot of the hatred that they feel towards us is that we do leave.”

The First Nations teacher, who was also considering leaving the community, had her own set of difficulties as a teacher and as outsider/insider. She was from a southern reserve and did not speak Cree, but was acknowledged as a First Nations teacher. She commented,

Sometimes I feel kind of strange because I've lived on reserves most of my life and hung around with Native people all my life. And then I come here and [am] labeled as “teacher.” Here I'm hanging around with a lot of non-Native teachers. I don't mind, but sometimes it's kind of strange. You know, you're “the teacher,” even though I'm Native. But I'm still not from the community. I'm still an outsider. But I am Native, you know what I mean?

Originally from a southern reserve, this young teacher struggled with her association with non-Aboriginal teachers and with the equation of *teacher* with *whiteness* that threatened to undermine her sense of credibility and authenticity both as teacher and as Native.

Several of the teachers in one community found it difficult to defend their position and expertise when as non-Aboriginals they were excluded from a home-and-school meeting about discipline policy at one particular school. The exclusion caused considerable tension for teachers and for some of the parents. Although the non-Aboriginal teachers were ultimately invited back into the meeting, one teacher described the incident as “a slap in the face.” What was remarkable about this incident was that at the time none of the teachers could defend their presence at the meeting. Only later was one teacher able to say,

I agree that it [the discipline policy] has to come from the community, but ... we're the ones that are going to be enforcing the rules so therefore one or two of us should be in that decision-making process ... we care about the students. We're working with them. We know what goes on in the day-to-day, so we should be there.

Whether this is an accurate representation of the incident or not, the difficulty in defining or negotiating their relationship to the community, even with regard to matters of schooling and pedagogy, was all too apparent. The grounds of engagement with the community on educational matters among other things obviously need further discussion and clarification. First-year teachers seemed unprepared for such discussions. The need to acknowledge the local control of First Nations people over education is all too apparent.

One of the more experienced teachers felt at times undervalued by the community, particularly in the ongoing efforts to replace white teachers with First Nations teachers:

They keep telling us that they'll be replacing us with Native staff, but I don't see it happening any time real soon. I see the importance of having Native teachers, but don't degrade what I'm doing. Don't make us feel we're here just for the duration until they can replace us, you know. I think we've done a very good job, [though] it would be nice to have role models for the kids.

Considering the history of education in the North and the overt and subtle forms of systemic racism that continue to permeate schooling practices generally, it should not be surprising that First Nations communities wish to hire Aboriginal teachers. For non-Aboriginal teachers, particularly those who had been in the community for years and who really had made their lives in the North, contending with the changing nature of their relationship to the community knowing that they might soon be replaced was a difficult issue.

With the social and political landscape shifting as First Nations people take greater control over their education system, it is not surprising that the relationships between Aboriginal communities and non-Aboriginal teachers are at times filled with tension. No doubt this is tied to changing relations between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people generally in Canada. Regardless of the reason, the need to create productive rather than contentious working relationships between Aboriginal communities and their non-Aboriginal teachers—ultimately to the benefit of teachers and, most important, the students—would seem critical. Of course, with more Aboriginal people gaining teaching credentials and with the long-term goal of hiring Aboriginal rather than non-Aboriginal teachers, the point may be moot, but in the short term the role of non-Aboriginal teachers in the North and their relationship to the community needs greater clarification, at least for the teachers involved in this study. Furthermore, as indicated by the Aboriginal teacher interviewed in the study, the relationship between First Nations teachers and their First Nations schools may also need attention by the community because neither is this an easy relationship to negotiate.

Living in the North

All the teachers spoke at some length about their adjustment to living in a small, remote northern locality. Several, even the experienced teachers who had been in

the North for some time mentioned the isolation of their communities. A first-year teacher commented, "I get homesick. Just the fact that you're not able to get away whenever you want ... I felt it most when there was a death in my family and I couldn't get out. I was stuck," and she admitted that the isolation was difficult for her marriage, particularly as her partner was also a teacher: "Being together all the time puts a strain on a couple's relationship." She commented that it was hard

being isolated and away from luxuries and away from the family. We miss a clean bath and just being able to take a drink of water from the tap, and just going to the movies once in while or out for dinner.

Another teacher said, "You're not isolated socially. You are isolated from the rest of the world though. I really miss the paper [daily newspaper]. That makes me feel isolated from world events." On the positive side she commented, "I never think about money when I'm up here. I never spend it. And I do not miss winter driving": She could walk everywhere.

One of the more profound adjustments for many of the white teachers was a sudden, more intense awareness of their racial difference: "I felt like a stranger in a strange place because I looked different from everybody else." Conscious not only of being white, but also what whiteness has meant historically in these communities, one teacher made an amazing disclosure:

I should mention to you that for quite a while when I got here, I looked at myself a lot. I kept physically looking at myself. Because I kept thinking, what do I look like? It was very strange. What do I look like to them? I kept trying, because I'd never seen myself as the oppressor. I could never see myself as—even though I'm white, because I always felt I was on the periphery—I never felt really Wonder Bread white. And I was all of a sudden. And I would look all the time. I remember asking myself questions like, how white am I? I did that a lot. It was very weird.

For some suddenly being white did not remain a problem:

Most of the time I just feel like I'm part of the community. When I'm in the Northern Store, people look at me, like she must be a teacher or a nurse, but I don't feel uncomfortable there. I think most people are friendly.

Some of the teachers spoke of having to deal with overt sexism, and the white teachers what they called racism, that is, a comment or action that reflected a personal bias or prejudice against them as individuals because they were white. One teacher was warned about this in a hearsay comment:

Well, the social hierarchy here was explained to me by a Native person. You know I can't remember who, but this was when I first got here. And everybody knows this. It's just sort of that you have Native men and it goes down the line and then you have dogs and then you have white women.

Another teacher in a different community related a similar story told to her by a white woman: "I don't know if it's across the board in the culture—but I have been told that women in this community are just above dogs. White women are below that. There is no respect for white women at all." At the same time this teacher insisted that she had not experienced this personally:

I must say, I've had no disrespect shown to me by adult Native men at all. None at all. I get along very well with all the Native men that I have had dealings with, but they don't respect their own mothers or their own sisters.

It should be noted that this teacher also mentioned the sexism of white male colleagues. Several other women shared personal experiences of sexism and white racism, although they often described the incidents as minor, albeit unexpected.

In general teachers experienced a kind of cultural shock, despite knowing full well the circumstances that they were entering into when they were hired. The teacher who had extensive personal and professional experience with Aboriginal culture and several years of experience living in the North indicated that she found life in the community a difficult adjustment:

I find it rough myself in many ways to be here. For me in many ways it's a shock. I just can't imagine what some teachers go through who have never been exposed to this kind of environment in their entire lives. It must be really shocking and it is.

The other side of culture shock was the fear of a few teachers that they might adjust too well to life in the remote North. Although teachers were all considering eventually leaving the community for jobs elsewhere, several worried about their ability to readjust to life in the South. "I don't see myself being a 'lifer' here, as they call it ... I'm not a Northerner, although it has been said to me that 'the North gets into your blood' and it may get in mine." Another teacher mentioned that her parents were worried the she and her husband would become "bushwhacked," which according to this teacher meant "That you spend too much time in the bush, away from what you were used to when you grew up ... if people stay too long ... they might find it an adjustment to go back."

Many of the teachers spoke about the positive aspects of living in the North: "I thought it would be neat to work in a place that's removed. I've always been an outdoors person, wanting to live away from it all." Another was surprised how much she enjoyed winter:

Certainly I love the winters up here. I never thought I would because I hate the cold. I've always hated the cold. I've always hated winter ... but it's so bright, so clean and so crisp. It's the best season of the year up here.

Nonetheless, adjustment to the community and to life in the North was, as one might expect, an issue for the many of the teachers interviewed in the study.

Teaching in the North

Although many of the teachers interviewed had wished to teach in a smaller center, only a few had deliberately set out to teach in a northern First Nations community. Many of the first-year teachers were simply interested in securing a teaching job regardless of where it might be: "I really wanted to work, so I would work wherever I got a job." Some had concerns about teaching First Nations children:

I had reservations about whether or not I could teach Native children, because I'm not Native. And because I was just such an outsider, I just didn't know how I could do that, or if I even had the right to do something like that ... I just didn't know if I had the right to invite myself into somebody else's community, but then I rationalized it by thinking, "Well,

obviously they need non-Native people to come to the community and if somebody has to do it, I don't want it to be someone who just wants a job."

The teachers also named specific pedagogical issues and problems with which they struggled. Many teachers felt unprepared for issues of classroom management. One teacher commented,

I've got kids in grade 10 ranging in age from 15 to 20. I wasn't expecting that. I was surprised at the absenteeism. I was surprised at their poor skills. Really surprised. I was surprised how poorly behaved they were.

At the most extreme, the high level of violence reported at one school was extremely traumatic for teachers and something for which they were unprepared.

Many teachers felt generally unprepared for the demands placed on them. They found themselves teaching grades or programs that were unexpected and felt over- or underqualified for their teaching assignment. One teacher working in a special program described her appointment saying,

As a teacher, I see myself standing in front of a classroom talking to 25 or 30 kids and allowing them to learn as a group and as individuals. And here I don't do that. I feel more like a tutor or a resource person, which is exactly what I am.

Another said,

I had no idea that the language situation would be as bad as it is. I had no idea that Cree was their first language ... I feel I'm inadequate here for what I'm doing. I don't feel that I know enough. I'm not trained. I can't help—with the English. I don't know how. I don't know where to start.

Many of the teachers mentioned the need for extensive English as a second language (ESL) training, and several were considering upgrading in this area. Many spoke of the need for training in special education as well. In general the teachers seemed unprepared for the range of pedagogical needs they would have to address. One, remembering her first year, commented, "I was just overwhelmed. I was overwhelmed by everything. By the amount of work you do, by all the playing, by the units, by everything."

As well the general school atmosphere was often different from what at least one teacher had expected. She commented,

It's very, very casual ... we're not supposed to wear jeans. Everyone wears pants. There's no way that you dress up in your nice little dresses, like you would wear teaching down south or wear to an office. I have a closet full of stuff I've never worn ... I like to dress in a business-like way because I want to convey a business-like atmosphere to my classroom. This was a highfalutin' dream I had, you know, before I got into it.

All teachers, even those who felt overwhelmed by the job, seemed dedicated individuals who cared about their students. Most could easily name moments when they felt "like a teacher." One particularly enjoyed the professional independence accorded to her, although she seems to have missed the important and hard-won role of local bands in administrative and curricular decisions:

I don't have to consult with my colleagues when I decide to make changes to my course ... it's all in my hands. Everything I do it's on my shoulders. It's a lot of responsibility because you can't rely on somebody else to do it. But then again whatever successes I have, they're

mine and mine alone. I've got a lot of freedom so it's really liberating to work in this kind of environment.

Her advice to prospective teachers emphasized learning and staying positive: "If you're the kind of person who is looking for a challenge, that is, looking and eager and hungry to learn yourself, and know that you don't know it all, then this is a great place to be. It's a great place to be."

Teacher Education

As mentioned above, many of the first-year teachers felt overwhelmed and under-prepared for their teaching assignment. Many indicated that they felt they were learning on the job and as a result had specific advice for those planning to teach in the North and for teacher educators attempting to improve programs. Many of the teachers interviewed said that they would have liked more specific training for the context in which they were teaching. Native education courses were seen as important, but even those who had taken courses in Native education were not satisfied that they had received enough preparation. One teacher suggested, "More Native education than just one night a week. More Native content, Native literature ... offer more generally in the curriculum." Another described what was useful about her course:

I took the Native education class, which really had nothing to do with teaching up here. There were Native students in the course and you got to be friends with them and talking to them, you learned their first-hand experiences, and that part was useful.

One teacher spoke of classroom management: "I think that the faculties [of education] have got to spend a lot more time on classroom management. We only got a few lectures." Another complained about the irrelevance of some of her course work: "You know we went through this great big rigorous thing on how to write lesson plans. How many lesson plans do you think I've written this year?"

One first-year teacher felt her practicum experience (student teaching) had left her unprepared for her current assignment:

The schools I went to were kind of utopian. I was placed in Catholic schools and they were the rich high schools in the city. I was preparing programs for the mainstream, hardly any ESL students. Almost all my students were white. I had a couple of different groups, but everyone could definitely speak English in all the classes that I taught.

As mentioned above, many of the teachers were planning to complete ESL courses and, in hindsight, felt there should have been more emphasis on ESL in their teacher education programs. One teacher said, "I know I would want to take more professional development in ESL," and other said, "I think ESL should be compulsory. There are no resources. No one to help me."

One teacher strongly advised those taking a teaching position in the North, to really study the culture before they come here. Learn as much as they can about it instead of stepping into it and not knowing. Try not be too judgmental. It makes a lot of problems. Prepare yourself for the isolation and the ways of life here. It's a big culture shock to be here for a lot of city people.

As well, teachers suggested that people should consider carefully their decision to teach in the North, "When you send up these résumés to Native communities, if

you're doing it, I think people should really think about it. They go through an awful lot of teachers in the North." Another reiterated this advice, but also expressed her doubt that any preparation was possible: "I think they should really think about why they want to be there. Think of their motives for coming. But really, there's no way to prepare for this. No way."

Conclusions and Recommendations

This study was intended to provide a cursory examination of the issues and concerns of women teaching in northern Ontario, so conclusions are suggestive rather than definitive. More research in more communities is obviously required before generalizations about the experience of female teachers in the North can be made. However, it is apparent from this study that despite considerable divergence of opinion, conflicting ideas, and experiences described by the teachers—reflecting different personal and professional histories, philosophies, and experiences—nevertheless there were common issues. In general the teachers were struggling to define their work and themselves in relation to the political, social, and geographical context in which they found themselves. Although this is perhaps predictable in the circumstances, the intensity of the struggles experienced by the first-year teachers in particular strongly suggests a need for better preparation and subsequent support for teachers in these contexts. Obviously preparation for cross-cultural or multicultural teaching is a key concern, and cultural negotiation is another.

The study suggests a series of questions for teacher educators and for local school and community leaders.

1. Is it really possible to prepare teachers from elsewhere for work and life in the North? If it is possible, how do we best prepare teachers for careers in remote, northern, band-controlled schools? Who should control or direct such preparation and ongoing professional development, and how should this be done? What needs to be included, and where should such education and preparation take place? For whom (which students, which schools, which communities) are we currently preparing and inservicing teachers?
2. How do issues of sex, race, and other forms of social difference affect the recruitment, initial preparation, ongoing professional development, and personal experience of female teachers working in the North? How should or can teacher education programs and ongoing professional and community development address these issues? What is the role of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal female teachers in the ongoing process by which communities develop their school policies and practices in the North? How is this to be decided?

I offer some of my own thoughts on these questions for consideration. Although it may be argued that teacher education programs cannot possibly hope to prepare individuals for every contingency a first-year teacher might encounter, it seems clear that the need to educate teachers for work and life in communities other than their own and/or with students who do not necessarily share the same cultural background is important. Indeed, the need to prepare individuals to teach across difference seems crucial when one considers the growing numbers of visible

minorities in this country and the increasing diversity of Canadians generally, let alone the historical and contemporary circumstances of Aboriginal students.

Regarding the teachers' comments, it seems that teacher education programs should be reexamined in the light of their current ability to prepare teachers for minority or multicultural contexts. An already large body of related research and scholarship supports a demand for schools to be more sensitive to issues of social difference and social justice. This study adds to that research. The issues described here suggest rethinking the content, experiences, and approaches offered in teacher education programs. This may mean reexamining the experience teacher education programs require of their applicants. In terms of coursework, ESL and special and inclusive education may need greater emphasis, at least according to the 10 teachers interviewed in this study. Practicum experiences may also need to be rethought. Quite possibly student teachers from the dominant culture should be exposed to schools that are culturally, racially, and ethnically different from those with which they are more familiar. The problems faced by the Aboriginal teacher in this study also suggest that intra- as well as interethnic and racial differences need to be considered.

Instead of preparing individuals for a generic school, teacher education programs might focus on the need to prepare individuals for specific schools and communities. Knowing that each particular school and community has its own unique challenges and resources, teachers might be more strongly prepared to take an inquiry or problem-solving orientation to their work. This would mean intensifying teachers' sensitivity to the school context and to negotiating that context, all the time knowing and expecting that there will be surprises, challenges, ambiguity, and uncertainty. Perhaps programs on First Nations education should include greater contact between teacher graduates, their schools, and communities so that teacher preparation might be geared more specifically to meet the needs of the North and their teachers. Perhaps teachers should be required to take additional qualifications before they teach in First Nations communities. This may mean greater professional development led by community initiatives for those from elsewhere who come to teach in the North. There is much work for schools to do in their hiring, counseling, and onsite training. In the interests of their children, communities may also wish to intensify their efforts to help in the social and cultural adjustment of teachers in their community.

Following from the comments of some of the white female teachers in this study, work is required to improve the preparation of these teachers specifically. Although white teachers may become the exception rather than the rule in various minority and multicultural communities, their relationship to schools and communities needs to be discussed and clarified. Although schools and communities and their teachers will ultimately negotiate this relationship, teacher education programs can help in this area. Faculties of education working together with First Nations groups might become sites where stronger cross-cultural, multicultural education and Native education programs can be developed that focus not only on minority groups, but on the contemporary and historical relationships between minority and majority groups, articulated at the level of individual teachers, students, and their communities.

In general the relationship of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal female teachers to the community and to cross-cultural or multicultural teaching needs further investigation. Clearly, attention to how sex and race affect the attempt to define and negotiate a sense of oneself as teacher should be a greater part of teacher preservice education and later inservice professional development. It is most apparent from this study that the issues and concerns of female teachers and of the Aboriginal children and communities they serve are worthy of more attention than is currently given. And the Innu children of Davis Inlet, so much in the news these days, remind us of how urgently this attention is needed.

Notes

¹For a discussion of the roles and images that white female teachers work with and against in negotiating a sense of themselves as teachers in the North, see Harper (2000a). For a discussion of the teaching of English in the North, see Harper (2000b).

²Women occupy 65% of the teaching positions in the Northwest Territories and Yukon according to the Canadian Teachers' Federation (1993).

³Because the study included a South Asian woman and a First Nations woman along with eight white women, I make a distinction between Non-Aboriginal and Aboriginal teachers rather than Aboriginal and white women teachers. The relation of the South-Asian teacher to the community seemed to be different in some respects from that of the white women. However, the data are not extensive enough to address this difference, but the relationship of a minority teacher to a First Nations community would be worthy of further investigation. The relationship of the Aboriginal teacher to the community was also complex because she was not from the band and could not speak the language. This kind of relationship also needs further research. Another important point about racial designations was that from discussions with students and teachers, bloodlines did not necessarily determine Aboriginal or non-Aboriginal status in the two communities, at least in everyday discourse. As noted by one teacher, there were white people who were accepted as part of the community because they had married a band member. Evidently phenotype did not determine status exclusively in at least in some informal contexts. In this article I do use the term *white* as a racial category, but it does necessarily refer to a phenotype. In this study, as in others, it is important to acknowledge the problematic and shifting nature of racial identification.

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