

# Exploring Multiple Serendipitous Experiences in a First Nations Setting as the Impetus for Meaningful Literacy Development

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*Based on a series of seemingly serendipitous experiences that occurred for the author, this article argues that such experiences can become events with meaning and provide the impetus for further learning (Dewey, 1925) if the learner develops a reflective practice and recognizes the role and relevance of learning from experience. As a result of these incidences, van der Wey examines the pedagogical implications for classroom practice. Beginning with a narrative of her experiences on the grounds of the former Kamloops Indian Residential School in British Columbia, the article then details van der Wey's classroom research using qualitative methodology (journal entries, participant observation, and a focus group interview) involving parents and students that evolved as a result of those experiences. She adds a cautionary note that although experience may well be the foundation of learning, it does not in itself lead to it; there must be active critical engagement with it. The author closes with her argument for the teaching of sensitive First Nations issues in a non-Native classroom and lays out important considerations if a teacher wishes to undertake a similar practice.*

In the summer of 2000 I drove to Kamloops, BC from the Vancouver area, supposedly for the exclusive purpose of facilitating a session in the Curriculum and Instruction class offered by Simon Fraser University as a component in the First Nations Master of Education program. Little did I know that seemingly serendipitous events would unfold that would affect my life as teacher, graduate student, and as a person exploring her First Nations roots and origins.

My article, then, begins with a narrative that I wrote while in Kamloops and moves on to lay out a teaching sequence that evolved as a consequence of that initial set of experiences supported by theory on experiential learning and literary theory. I examine briefly how my varying identities became intertwined to create a whole and close with reflections on conditions that I see as critical for turning seemingly serendipitous events into meaningful learning experiences.

## *Events That Provide the Impetus for Learning*

The strong scent of smoke fills my nostrils and lingers there the moment I enter the pit house. I immediately begin to soak up the atmosphere of this winter underground dwelling place of the Secwepemc/Shuswap people of 5000 years ago, stark in its simplicity, yet warm and inviting all at once. I take in the multiple slender logs making their way in a circular fashion

upward toward the two natural skylights, a rich, blue sky bursting in. Two notched, firm poles extend through the openings, obviously makeshift ladders. Cedar bark provides a brace for the otherwise exposed face of the dugout circumference of the wall. I visualize the earth/gravel floor covered with fresh fir branches, woven mats, and animal skins, a cozy environment for a cold winter evening. A simple, wooden bench (one of five) provides a resting place around the fire to sit, observe, and imagine this as my home thousands of years ago, surrounded by family amid the hubbub of activity—tools and clothing made or repaired; men returning from a day of ice fishing; food prepared and consumed, all in anticipation of the storytelling that would bring the day to closure.

As I sit I recall the outside appearance of this structure, a swelling of the landscape covered in compacted earth, and I am reminded of Highwater (1981) emphasizing that Hopi towns are not concerned with fitting in with nature, they are nature. As Highwater points out, it is not coincidental that they resemble the shapes of the earth. To the Hopi, architecture is at once “an act of reverence and a congruence of terrain, materials, and tribal sensibility” (p. 125). And so it seems it was with the Secwepemc.

This reconstructed home, one of several displaying the evolution in lifestyle of the Secwepemc from 5000 years ago to the 19th century at the Heritage Park in Kamloops, has provided me a momentary refuge from the “unnatural” world to ponder the problem of how to recover a connectedness to the earth both parochially and metaphysically, a dilemma articulated by Highwater (1981). I suspect that the answer lies, at least in part, somewhere in the buzz of activity on the grounds that currently surround me.

The outdoor displays of the 12-acre Heritage Park include the archeological remains of a Shuswap winter village site, and a summer village complete with survival artifacts and an ethnobotanical garden that was created in 1999 to promote an understanding of Secwepemc language, culture, and use of native plants. It abounds with traditional plant foods, as well as those used for medicinal purposes, tools, and implements. Several young men move through the gardens and orchards adjusting hoses and interpretive signs, appearing to be lost in the solitude of their work.

The park serves to complement not only the Secwepemc Museum, which houses ethnographic displays of clothing, tools, weapons, and baskets, among other artifacts, but also an archeological exhibit that explains the methods used in the work of archeologists. As the museum is situated adjacent to the former Kamloops Indian Residential School (KIRS), it is not surprising that reminders of the residential school era are also displayed here.

While strolling through the trails of the gardens, dry, warm wind blowing through my hair, grasses bending, cattails and birds sharing the marsh, I can't help but be struck by the irony of the Heritage Park jux-

taposed against the old Residential School; a celebration of the resourcefulness and embodied divinity shared with nature, contrasted with the buildings that serve as an historical reminder of the nature of Native education since the Europeans first arrived.

The day before, I had the privilege of touring the school with a member of the Simon Fraser University Master of Education Program—Kamloops First Nations cohort. I had read Shirley Sterling's (1992) account of her childhood experiences at KIRS in her book *My Name is Seepeetza* and scanned Haig-Brown's (1988) *Resistance and Renewal: Surviving The Indian Residential School*; the experience was a powerful one. Walking through the dormitories I could almost feel the presence of young children, frightened and lonely at being away from family, home, and a lifestyle they had embraced, enduring humiliation and punishment for speaking their language, forced to deny all that being Native meant to them. The story of one child whose family had lived across the highway from the school but who had been prohibited from going home except for holidays was rendered even more poignant when we looked out the dormitory window in the direction of her home, as she must have done each day, questioning why this was happening to her.

And the irony of Shirley Sterling returning to those dormitories to teach a course to students in the Native Indian Teacher Education Program speaks to the resilience of the people, and strength of resistance that Haig-Brown articulated in her book: this and the realization that the facility now also houses a daycare facility for students and employees, a preschool, and a collection of other political and educational enterprises.

Reflecting on the revitalization process unfolding before my eyes in multiple ways, I was reminded of another experience from the day before that is clearly woven into the fabric of the whole. As participant-observer in a segment of the class on Curriculum and Instruction of the above-mentioned cohort, I joined a small-group sharing of significant cultural artifacts. I was moved by the pattern unfolding before me. Each participant shared an object connected to intergenerational family memories, each story was poignant, and each participant was safe in joining in the shared process of healing, waiting supportively as some regained composure. I sensed that each was celebrating the courage and determination in being part of shaping a more positive, hopeful future for First Nations people, without compromising deeply embedded values—values held sacred, including family, culture, language, and community. As one woman, Margaret Wilson, stated, "For 12 years, eight in residential school and four in boarding school, they tried to strip me of my language, but they couldn't, for it was deep within my soul."

As Margaret spoke, I recalled vividly her earlier presentation in class. In responding to the notion that all events of learning are events of synthesis and integration, that "learning to be literate is always an act of resymbolizing and reinterpreting past experience in relation to present

and projected experiences" (Davis, Sumara, & Luce-Kapler, 2000, p. 248), this woman had read a children's story in her native language, using hands and voice in the portrayal of characters and situations. Her language was indeed brought to life through this experience; clearly she enjoyed speaking her language with anyone who understands. We understood. She closed our artifact sharing session by recalling her grandfather's oft repeated statement "We are all related" and suggested that on that day it had taken on new meaning. Indeed it had for me as well.

### *Reflection and the Shaping of Practice*

Later, as I drove home, I continued to ponder these seemingly separate incidences and how my awareness of the overlapping connections between the threads had become clear to me as I sat in the winter pit. I was consumed on arrival home with reading Sterling's novel again, as well as Haig-Brown's ethnographic study, which I read voraciously this time, highlighting critical points throughout and analyzing her research methodology as well. Other related texts and experiences seemed to open up for me. Clearly my experiences had provided the impetus for further enquiry—where events did not simply happen, but rather, were events with meaning (Dewey, 1925). "Propositional knowledge is that which is contained in theories or models—textbook knowledge—knowing that ... The experiential domain of knowledge is knowledge gained through direct personal encounters with a subject, person or a thing" (Burnard, 1988, p. 128).

How, then, did these multiple serendipitous overlapping experiences serve as a trigger for meaningful learning? What is my purpose in sharing them? As a learner, my interest was piqued to explore further why I was prompted to turn this experiential knowledge into propositional knowledge that could be shared and interrogated (Boud, Cohen, & Walker, 1993), and what implications this experience might have for educational practice. As Boud et al. state beautifully,

What is missing is recognition of the role and relevance of learning from experience no matter where it occurs. Learning involves much more than an interaction with an extant body of knowledge; learning is all around us, it helps create our lives—who we are, what we do. (p. 1).

They add that learning is maximized through interaction, either directly or symbolically, with elements outside the learner. In addition, they recognized a need for authors to acknowledge significant experiences that had served to lead them to their present position, experiences that had affected them. Boud et al. invited authors, then, to "write themselves into their chapters" (p. 3) and share by way of an autobiographical account what had led them to their present views. My narrative is a response to their call.

In order to make explicit the pedagogical implications of my story, I now outline a set of interconnected classroom practices developed follow-

ing my experience; these are practices that expand on and elaborate my previous research, including what I recognize as critical components. I then close with further reflections, both personal and theoretical.

The study developed and taught in my grade 4/5 class in the spring of 2001 became very much a collaborative venture where I worked with the grade 3/4 teacher in our school to shape practice. Our classes joined together frequently as we focused on the Secwepemc of the central interior of British Columbia and the Sto:lo of the Fraser Valley. The intent was to have the children begin to develop an appreciation of each culture through a variety of experiences. The choice was a natural fit with both the grades 4 and 5 British Columbia social studies prescribed learning outcomes. Multiple resources are available to support such a program, including recent texts published in collaboration with the Sto:lo and Secwepemc (Shuswap) people; recent social studies textbooks for grades 4 and 5 published by Oxford University Press; texts that include an introduction to the notion of stereotyping, historical language, land and resource use, as well as a touching on issues such as government assimilation policy.

In addition, my colleague contacted Langley School District's Aboriginal Program department (which includes Sto:lo Nation and Kwantlen support workers), to arrange for Native Elders and cultural experts to work with the class in order to engage our students in a multitude of experiences, including an introduction to Sto:lo/Salish weaving, participation in a "talking circle," bannock-making under the guidance of a Kwantlen Elder, and participation in the dedication of a commissioned carving by a Squamish carver XWALACKTUN, to name but a few. Field trips to the Coqualeetza Longhouse, Xa:ytem (an archeological site in the Sto:lo area), and the Museum of Anthropology at the University of BC extended these learning experiences.

At the center of the study, though, was the shared experience of reading and engaging with the novel *My Name is Seepeetza*, Sterling's (1992) account of her experiences at the Kamloops Indian Residential School. Following practices used in earlier research (van der Wey, 1997) each student in the class received a personal copy of the book. In taking ownership of the book students become free to record responses to the text, note unfamiliar vocabulary, underline passages, write in the margins, and make entries at the end of chapters. They may choose to add Post-it notes, or not; or record all responses in a separate journal, if they prefer. By engaging in reading and response (both in written and oral form) students become increasingly aware that reading is much more than decoding words. It is also about developing a meaningful relationship with the text; recognizing that reading is as much about the experiences of the reader as it is about the experiences writers write about (Davis et al., 2000; Sumara, Davis, & van der Wey, 1998; van der Wey, 1997); or, as Rosenblatt (1978) suggests, in aesthetic reading "the reader's attention is centered directly on what he is living through during his relationship with that particular text"



(p. 25). By recording their thoughts in the text, on second and subsequent readings readers are better able to recognize the changing, shifting nature of their interaction with the text based on experiences and interactions between readings, to recognize that their thinking and interpretation is not static.

In order to set the stage for the novel, the class read the newspaper article entitled "Churches Must Prove Their Claims of Poverty: Before Expecting the Government to Help Pay Compensation for Abuse at Residential Schools, Churches Should Open Their Books" (2000). Students then explored the pros and cons of the question "Should the government and churches be held responsible for compensating victims of residential school?" and then offered their personal decisions. Most of the students felt that the government and churches involved had an obligation to provide some form of compensation. A handful was undecided. Throughout the study a variety of picture books and information texts about First Nations were available to students to read independently in order to expand their understanding of First Nations beliefs, traditions, and ways of being.<sup>1</sup> Many of these texts were read aloud to the class and discussed briefly.

We began the experience with *My Name is Seepeetza* (Sterling, 1992) by having students move outward from themselves, writing in journals about their own needs, values, and routines. What are their favorite meals, snacks, and celebrations? How much do they value familial connections? What chores or recreational activities are parts of their daily or weekly regimen? We felt it was important to embed the curriculum into the familiar world of the students and then move outward from there, helping them connect the curriculum to their region, nation, and world (Wheaton, 1999).

Most students chose to capture key phrases, reactions, questions, and interesting vocabulary on Post-it notes as we read the text, returning later to develop their ideas further in their journals. For many, simply referring to the Post-its allowed students to engage in conversations, expand on the ideas of others, or in many cases to take issue with each other's points of view.

Students were also expected to demonstrate understanding of the text through writing in a variety of genres, including poetry, illustrations of humorous events with accompanying captions, writing a newspaper article about events unfolding at the school, and a letter to Seepeetza. We also arranged to take our classes, on completion of the first reading of the novel and the bulk of our study, to the Secwepemc Museum and Heritage Park in Kamloops as described in my experience above. We prepared the students by introducing them to the land of the Secwepemc, including the seasonal cycle, beliefs, traditional uses of local plants, and government. We also arranged to have Shirley Sterling guide us through the former residential school. As Wheaton (1999) recognizes, "Students need to be

able to see how and why history is relevant to them and people who experienced it first hand" (p. 164). Could the experience of having a story told have the same impact in a classroom as it would in the setting where poignant events unfolded for the storyteller?

Fuss (1989), in her book *Essentially Speaking: Feminism, Nature and Difference*, worries that to provide a platform for formerly marginalized and oppressed people to speak serves to relegate others to the sidelines; that the artificial boundary created between insider and outsider serves to contain rather than disseminate knowledge. Further, Fuss asserts that appeals to the "authority of experience" not only provoke confusion, but introjections of experiential truths into classroom discussions also have the effect of bringing them to rapid closure. I have found this not to be the case in the past and this experience was no exception. Rather, as hooks (1994) has experienced as well, I have seen how the telling of personal experience is incorporated into classrooms in ways that deepen discussion and promote further enquiry. For example, children were comfortable probing any issue that arose for them as they engaged with the text and attempted to understand the conditions. Katie A. (grade 4) reflected about Jimmy, Seepeetza's older brother, being taken out of KIRS and being allowed to go to a public school:

Why could Seepeetza's dad be able to take Jimmy out of school and not any more of his kids? I think that he should be able to take all of his kids out, or none of them. I think that when he took only Jimmy out of KIRS then Seepeetza and her sister and Cookie would probably feel very unloved.

Others expressed similar points of view and raised similar questions; in fact they continued to probe this question with Sterling at the residential school. Further, despite my having made clear my First Nations origins (most particularly during the dedication ceremony mentioned above) students such as Jessica M. (grade 4) felt free to ponder this question aloud:

I think that Martha is picked on a lot because she probably has blue or green eyes and light skin like a white person would have. My question about that is, Why can't she just go to a white school and not tell anyone she's an Indian? I wish that in those times all Indians could be treated fairly but since they weren't, if you could pass for a white and have a better life, why not? She's having her culture taken away from her anyway.

My being First Nations may well have had the affect of having some students think more deeply about the circumstances at the school. For example, Katie A. grappled with the question of Seepeetza's family's religious beliefs:

I wonder if Seepeetza learns the Catholic religion from school or if her family believes it. If she learns it from school then wouldn't her family be against it, kind of? Or do they want the school to teach it? Was spitting really rude in those days? I think it was because Seepeetza's dad spat every time he saw a priest, and he didn't like priests at all.

Others expressed much distaste for how the children were treated in general but also noted that there were exceptions. Steven (grade 4) offered:

I like when Brother Reilly said to Seepeetza [that] he loved her writing about her story. I think that's really nice and Seepeetza should be treated that way when the nuns are around. I think that's why Seepeetza became a writer, because Brother Reilly encouraged Seepeetza in a deep way.

Jesse M. (grade 4) made this observation that served to raise new questions for him: "I noticed that Brother Reilly really is a very nice person at the Kamloops Indian Residential School. Are there any more priests or nuns that are nice like Brother Reilly?" And Jessica M. added further:

I think that somewhere in her heart Sister Theo actually cares about the girls like when she made Dorothy a study area. The girls probably don't think of the sisters as their friends like Martha said (I know I wouldn't) but I think that maybe somewhere in their hearts the nuns don't want to hurt the girls and are only doing what they think is right.

Seth M. (grade 4) and Amanpreet S. (grade 5) respectively felt much more strongly about assimilationist practices:

I think it's sad that the kids couldn't use their real names. They should be able to be called by their Indian names, they are Indian. The government can't change them into white people by changing their names.

I think it was not nice that the nuns changed the kids' names. It was a good thing that I was not there because I have an Indian name and my dad is from India. They should leave their names as they are because it's their own self and their name belongs to them.

Teachers and students who wish to share personal experience in the classrooms can do so without promoting essentialist standpoints that exclude if it is situated in a theory of learning. As Giroux (hooks, 1994) suggests in his writing on critical pedagogy, "we can critically engage that experience and we can move beyond it. But we can't deny it" (p. 88). As teacher I must be vigilant about creating safe conditions for multiple perspectives to be accepted, probed, challenged, and analyzed, and in recognizing the moment when the flow must be redirected in order to engage as many students as possible. In addition, I must ensure a balance between conversation and meaningful experience. I concur with hooks in the belief that to combine the analytical with the experiential is to create a richer way of knowing.

With this belief in mind, and rather than focusing solely on the Aboriginal peoples as victims of history—emphasizing only the effects of oppression by non-Aboriginal peoples—students engaged in a balanced experience through studies mentioned above, and their experiences at the Secwepemc Museum and Heritage Park. Noreen Pankewich<sup>2</sup> guided our students through the gardens, sharing her expertise in traditional uses of local plants. They observed first hand in the park and museum, guided by Dan Saul, not only how Aboriginal peoples have adapted and survived despite oppressive forces (Peers, 1995), but also the resourcefulness and ingenuity of the Secwepemc people of the past, including, for example, reed fishing traps, easily transportable reed summer homes, woven mats



and baskets, berry preservation techniques, and other discriminating uses of natural resources for food, clothing, housing, and medicinal purposes.

Sterling (Seepeetza) then joined us guiding the students through the school, sharing stories and responding to questions as we proceeded. The tour culminated in one of the old dormitories where questions continued for another hour, ranging from those seeking clarification of humorous anecdotes in the novel to questions of government policy. Seepeetza then accompanied us to the site of the former winter pit houses where students had time to soak up the ambience before settling comfortably to reflect and write in their journals.

What were their immediate responses to the experiences of the day? What events or experiences were most noteworthy? What connections, if any, might there be between these experiences? What piqued their attention to the extent that they might like to enquire further? What impact, if any, did it have on their responses to the events of the text to have Sterling responding to questions and telling stories in the site where most of the events took place? What effect, if any, did writing in this location have on their writing?

Students had the opportunity to share their reflections and engage in discussion if they so chose. Some even wished to write further following the discussion. It is, I believe, this process that creates conditions for critical thinking and further enquiry that provide the impetus for these multiple experiences and events to be more than isolated events. Without facilitated processing, that is what they are likely to become. As Boud et al. (1993) made clear, processing and reflecting on the personal experience is a major factor for developing higher-level learning. Dewey (1925) makes a similar point in framing his concept of experience, which includes both *having* and *knowing*. For Dewey, *having* relates to the immediacy of contact with the events of life, whereas *knowing* refers to the interpretation of the event. Experience, then, is an event with meaning, an active engagement with the environment, rather than simply a passive undergoing of something, an event that happens (Boud et al.). A number of students provide evidence to support such views, many incorporating the aesthetic experience into the intellectual. For example, Katie A. reflects on the day:

When we entered the pit house it really felt like home. The smell of earth met my nose and it smelled clean ... You can just imagine big families gathered around a big fire, telling stories. You can just feel the warmth inside even though it is cold. I love looking at the residential school, knowing that now, finally, I have seen it, smelled it, heard noises there are to be heard, knowing that now Seepeetza and her culture, religion, and family to go generations on are now safe from residential schools.

I enjoyed looking at the different plants and smelling them too. It's nice to be able to do that knowing that the First Nations people used them for medicine, weaving baskets, making mats, and even toilet paper!

It always amazes me at how even though the nuns and priests said that the First Nations people would be just like them when they're finished with them, they weren't. I always

think of Seepeetza as a flowing river and nothing can stop her from flowing; no dam, no boulder, no felled tree, because her culture, her beliefs and her traditions and language are in her and they always will be.

Breanna P. (grade 4) reflects succinctly but powerfully:

Today is a day I'll never forget. I was so happy because I heard the true story from a girl, now a lady, Seepeetza. I think I really enjoyed talking to Seepeetza best today because I really got to know what a Residential School was like. I wonder how she felt and feels now when she punched Edna ... I feel lucky to write here (in the winter pit). I feel like I'm from a different culture. When I went into the residential school I felt a little scared inside because of all of the horrible things that happened. When I walked to the pit house I loved the smell of the apple blossoms in the air (I could taste it!).

P.J. Virk (grade 5) recognized the juxtaposition of the Heritage Park against the backdrop of the residential school:

I thought the residential school was very noteworthy because I got a better picture of what the scene and look was like. I also liked the museum because it told me a lot about First Nations culture ... Well, the location has quite a pull because you see a park that's peaceful, then a school that used to torture children; but I like the museum because it was peaceful and calm.

Kathleen D. (grade 5) wrote poignantly, beginning on the banks of the river and continued in the pit house:

This place is beautiful, it's hard to believe that people used to be here and hated it. It makes me so happy to just sit here and think. I'm sitting right on a ledge by the Thompson River; it's so calm and peaceful. Right now I'm watching a pair of crows on the bank of the river. The river is so beautiful; it feels like I'm in a completely different world. Maria, Kim, and I are on the ledge now but it feels like I'm the only one here. I've taken a lot of pictures. I saw a pair of marmots; they live under a small platform. The mountains look like big giants looming out of a perfect serene world; it seems as if they are inviting me to come climb them. Below us there is a little bird. Meraii says it's a beach walker; it makes a weird high chirp. I can hear a Canada goose. It is so beautiful ... it is a perfect reflection of how I'm feeling right now. I can hear a small beat, sort of like a hum and the movement of the river.

[Later in the pit house] In the school it gives me a weird sense of sorrow and regret. The smell in the pit house is like a mix of wood and smoke. These experiences enriched my sense of First Nations ways of being. As for Seepeetza, she is a remarkable woman! She seemed to have a lot of the same interests as me such as reading, art, writing and horses. She is my role model! Being in the pit house to write helped me get a sense of connectedness to First Nations people that came before me. It helped me understand them and feel what it was like for them to live back then. Writing inside these structures enriched the whole experience.

Our day ended with the students engaged in playing traditional Shuswap games under the guidance of David Tremblay.

To conclude the study, students had the opportunity either to resymbolize their knowledge and understanding of the text and multiple shared experiences, or to explore further some aspect of the study that piqued their interest. Not surprisingly, Kathleen chose to create a photographic journey of events, providing detailed sidebars on every aspect of the day. Clearly, for Kathleen these overlapping experiences, as well as a deeply

reflective practice, provided the impetus for further meaningful learning and inquiry. Others chose to explore new but related territory such as learning about the basic needs of other cultures.

Later we revisited selected passages from Sterling's novel, including their previous responses. Students were encouraged to note any changes in their thinking, new insights, impressions, or interpretations of the events in the book since the first reading. My role was, as Davis et al. (2000) term it, to help students interpret the "space" between the two readings to notice and explain how perceptions might have changed since the first reading and what might have contributed to those changes.

Many students were struck by how Sterling described the structure of the school in the opening page of the text, something they had not noticed on the first reading. In fact many had an image quite unlike that described before going to the site. Students articulated their realization that what you notice and how you interpret a text changes as new experiences unfold for many reasons. Katie A. articulates her growing awareness:

I agree with Breanna because I also thought that the residential school would look way different and I think it's good that we're reading back because now we can see that it did say that, and sometimes you miss stuff the first time or you forget it later on in the book, because, I mean, it's a hundred pages later and you're kind of getting into the other stories or ideas so you don't really think about the beginning. It's good if you go back and read it a second time.

Other students added that the first few paragraphs of the book do not foreshadow the nature of what is to come; that it describes the setting in detail, but events that unfold from there came as surprise to the students. They only recognized this on the second reading. As well, they were able to analyze the relationship between Seepeetza and Edna much more deeply after reading the journal entries from page 20 and page 99 back to back and for the second time.

We also revisited the newspaper article that we opened the study with along with the question about compensating victims of the residential schools. This time, 21 students (in my class) responded "yes" and one indicated that "no," governments and churches should not be held responsible because, in her mind, today's generation should not be accountable for deeds of the past. Although I reminded the class to be cautious about assuming that Sterling's account represented all First Nations peoples' experiences in residential schools and that it only represented one person's perspective, their responses probably indicated a growing awareness and reaction to the assimilationist practices of the time.

Throughout the study my colleague and I observed time and again how deeply students engaged with the text, saw them come to recognize how meaning is located somewhere between the reader and the text, and to recognize reading as an important interpretation practice (Davis et al., 2000). Students provided evidence that they were able to reap the benefits

of combining the analytical and experiential in coming to know (hooks, 1994). As hooks states further, to develop critical thinkers and avoid the tag of essentialism, students must engage multiple locations and address diverse standpoints in order to gather knowledge fully and inclusively.

Through the classes' immersion in a study of the Sto:lo and Secwepemc people in particular, students became aware that the two Nations are distinct; that they are not one homogeneous, massive group as First Nations people as often depicted. Further, they came to see that the lifestyles in each distinct tribal history have changed and continue to change in response to changes in their surroundings rather than remaining static: they are fluid and dynamic (Wheaton, 1999).

With respect to the shaping of curriculum, Grumet (1988) views it as a moving form, thus making it difficult to capture, to fix in language, to lodge it in our matrix. Similarly, Langer (1957) draws on the relationship between the form and the motion of a waterfall to create a beautiful metaphor for her view of curriculum. She states:

The waterfall has a shape, moving somewhat, its long streamers seeming to shift like ribbons in a wind, but its mobile shape is a permanent datum in the landscape, among rocks and trees and other things. Yet the water does not really ever stand before us. Scarcely a drop stays there for the length of one glance. The material composition of the waterfall changes all the time; only the form is permanent and what gives any shape at all to the water is the motion. The waterfall exhibits a *form of motion*, or a *dynamic form*. (p. 48, original emphasis)

In the school curriculum, if individual and environment continually specify one another, if one is shaped by the other, then curriculum must fit within that dynamic form (van der Wey, 1997). School curriculum and indeed schooling events, then, must be shaped in a way that acknowledges they are events of life itself (Dewey, 1956). In this fluid mix, often perceived and interpreted as school and children co-specifying one another, is the role and impact of parents: a role I address in brief.

### *The Role of Parents in Shaping Practice*

In our initial meeting with parents to lay out the study, including introducing the novel and the proposed field trip, we also invited parents to join us, not only in reading the text, but also as participants in the day-to-day classroom engagement with the text. Nine parents responded to this invitation over the course of the study, some as many as six to eight times. There are, I believe, many sound reasons for involving parents in such a manner.

First, it opens the door for meaningful, curricular involvement in the classroom on the part of parents. Second, parents are privy to how curriculum unfolds in the classroom; the mystery about what we do dissipates rather than placing parents in the position of having to make assumptions from outside. Third, parents are able to observe first hand how capable their young children are at critically analyzing a text. They

recognize that not only can children learn to think critically; they also get excited and passionate about their growing ability to do so, even when they recognize that their own children may find reading a challenge. A strong response to an experience or event can open an entry point for them as the journal excerpts above indicate. One parent, Patti Preens, recognized a shift in her thinking as a result of her participation. She acknowledged that she was not alone in thinking that this topic and text was too deep for 9- and 10-year-olds:

I thought so too in the beginning. Now I realize that we often don't push children to what they are capable of ... we could have stolen enriching experiences from them. It was wonderful, it wasn't ... stale. I was amazed at what my child can do. When they are at home they can be completely different people. Children are much more capable than we think.

Fourth, parents, along with their children, come to see that interpretations of a text and related experiences (in this case around First Nations issues) goes far beyond the text and reader, that rather, we all bring prior knowledge and personal experiences that shape how we interpret the text, interpretations that are shaped and reshaped by hearing the voices and interpretations of others in our classroom community and beyond. One parent shared with me how she had grown up in a home where First Nations fosterchildren were a constant, and undoubtedly this experience contributed to a different point of view.

Last, when parents read a text and engage with students in ongoing dialogue about the text, field trips that expand understandings become much more meaningful learning experiences for child and parent. In effect the role of parent takes on a whole new meaning as it relates to traditional involvement in field trips. As Sue Millar, one of our parent participants, stated about the nature of this field trip:

For me this time I went looking for the halls where Seepeetza walked, and I went to try to feel what it must have been like. There was no sitting and talking on this field trip for me, it was ... it became real for me too. It wasn't just a social event for the parents. I went on that field trip expecting to come home with something and I wasn't disappointed. I came home with a feeling of ... I don't know if closure is the right word, but in a way it was, I had read the book, there were these questions answered.

I would suggest that Seepeetza herself may well have gone home that day not necessarily with a feeling of closure, but reflecting on how the day unfolded. I close this section where I lay out the many experiences of the study with the text of Seepeetza's message to the students following the trip and in response to their letters to her. Copies were made for all the students, many of whom made clear that it would be a treasured artifact of this experience and would be revisited many times. The letter is reprinted with Seepeetza's permission and was directed to each of the students by name, as well as all the teachers, parents, and helpers.



Thank you all for the great day at the Chief Louis Centre in Kamloops, the site of the old residential school, on May 8th. I had fun because we got to go inside the pit house or winter lodge and walk by the river where the grotto used to be and the orchard. I missed my old school chums. It seemed such a short time ago we were there together, little kids together in a strange and terrifying place, yet still able to laugh sometimes and to enjoy the small things children like, a good game, a bouncy ball, a smile from a friend, the incredibly joyful thought of going home.

It is sometimes hard for me to remember these things without crying. I would like to encourage each of you to be kind and gracious always, like my mum and grandmother, and to respect people no matter who they are or where they come from. Most of all to love and believe in yourselves, to take time to pray and to be thankful for all that you have; the gifts of the land, your family and friends and the beauty of Nature.

Thank you again for your good companionship, the "big" card and photos, and your kind words to me.

Love, Seepeetza

### Summary

In sharing this unit of study it is not my intent to suggest that one must adopt a similar series of overlapping strategies in order to engage students in experiential learning. Rather, I was simply modeling how my initial set of experiences led me in new directions and served to whet my appetite for new and greater depths of understandings, and cautioning that although experience may well be the foundation of learning, it does not in itself lead to it; there must be active critical engagement with it. By engaging in a dialogue with our experiences we are better able to turn experiential knowledge, which may not be readily accessible to us, into propositional knowledge that, as Boud et al. state (1993) "can be shared and interrogated" (p. 10).

Although the students I currently work with are non-Aboriginal, I believe, as Wheaton (1999) states, "that the more you learn about another culture, the more you find out about yourself" (p. 169). It is not enough though, in my view, simply to focus on basic needs and cultural rituals and traditions. In order to better understand First Nations people in today's society, learners must also understand events of history, even if they might be perceived as troubling. In her introduction to the book *Making the Spirit Dance Within: Joe Duquette High School and an Aboriginal Community* (Haig-Brown, Hodgson-Smith, Regnier, & Archibald, 1997), Haig-Brown opens with two quotes that I think are fitting to share again: "First Nations education must go beyond the bounds of being only for First Nations. Our place in this land must be understood by all Canadians so that we might work together toward building a more harmonious world" (Verna J. Kirkness, Cree Nation, 1992). And, "There cannot be peace or harmony unless there is justice" (Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, 1996). Katie A. provides evidence of such awareness:

I really seemed to learn something from this book. I don't know what it is, it seems to be buried inside me somewhere, like I'll dig it up whenever I need to remember it. But I know

it's there and before anyone, anyone I see that's reaching for hate about different races, I'll tell them about Seepeetza, and I think they'll change their minds about teasing that kid, or saying something nasty, and instead they just might start to say sorry.

There are some important considerations though, if a teacher is to undertake such a study. Immersion in professional development (either a course or a sequence of workshops) is essential if the focus is on teaching for thinking. Teachers must learn how to interact with students in a manner that serves to extend and examine ideas critically rather than shut down thinking. Equally important is recognizing that our role is to open the minds of learners to varying points of view and experiences; not to use the classroom as a forum for our own political agendas. When parents are involved, any apprehensions they may have about the content and delivery of curriculum can be quickly allayed. Sue Millar acknowledged that initially her reasons for joining us included the need to satisfy herself that, first of all, the issues in the book were not being presented "in a self-serving manner." By being there she was quickly assured that students were free to interpret the text in conversations among themselves in the group, and that I was not shaping interactions with my own opinions. My role was one of catalyst and facilitator.

Since developing this study I have come to recognize that, as stated above, three separate strands of my identity became interwoven. Had I not been a teacher who was simultaneously immersed in graduate studies *and* in the process of deepening my awareness of my own First Nations roots, I would probably not have responded to the experience of traveling to Kamloops as guest presenter in the course on Curriculum and Instruction in the same way. I might not have made inquiries about the former residential school that led to an invitation to tour the school, which ultimately led to the museum and on to the winter pit houses to write, and so on. One might argue that my experiences were anything but "serendipitous," but rather unfolded *because* of my simultaneous teacher-graduate student-First Nations identities. What matters, I think, is that our seemingly separate identities inevitably overlap and influence our decisions and reactions to incidents, often propelling us in new directions or clarifying our life paths and purposes. As well, we must be open to the limitless possibilities of significant experiences and develop a reflective practice that allows us to weave these experiences and identities together into a meaningful whole. I think that with ample opportunities for experiential learning, combined with the analytical component, rich, meaningful learning can take place with our students as well. They too may look out onto the world from different perspectives in the light of their own personal histories and view that world uniquely (Burnard, 1988).

#### Notes

<sup>1</sup>A selected list of children's literature used in the study appears in the Appendix.

<sup>2</sup>Noreen Pankewich is a member of the Sto:lo Nation, a teacher, and recent graduate of the Secwepemc Cultural Education Society, Simon Fraser University campus. She also has a passion for ethnobotany.

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### Appendix: Selected First Nations Books

\*Denotes Indigenous authors

- \*Archibald, J., Friesen, V., & Smith, J. (Eds.). (1993). *Courageous spirits: Aboriginal heroes of our children*. Penticton, BC: Theytus Books.
- Baylor, B. (1965). *One small blue bead*. New York: Atheneum Books for Young Readers.
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- \*Bruchac, J. (1993). *Fox song*. Toronto, ON: Oxford University Press.
- \*Campbell, M. (Trans.). (1995). *Stories of the road allowance people*. Penticton, BC: Theytus Books.
- \*Cuthand, B., & Cuthand, S. (1999). *The little duck • Sikihpis*. Penticton, BC: Theytus Books.
- Goldin, B.D. (1997). *The girl who lived with the bears*. San Diego, CA: Gulliver Books.
- \*King, F. (1994). *Grandfather drum*. Winnipeg, MB: Pemmican.
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