

Two Teachers of Aboriginal Students: Effective Practice in Sociohistorical Realities

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The study of effective teaching for Aboriginal students needs to be situated in the complexities of sociohistorical realities. In addition to cultural differences, the analysis needs to include the impact of colonization and power relationships in which education takes place. In this article, the stories of two teachers are presented to illustrate how in practice these teachers attend to both culture and colonization. Each teacher in different ways integrates language and cultural knowledge and uses cultural norms and values. In doing so, they develop more equitable power relationships and deal with the impact of colonization.

Introduction

This article explores effective teaching of Aboriginal students in the classroom. All too often in the past, the focus in Aboriginal¹ education has been on culture, to the exclusion of race and class (St. Denis, 2001). More recently many authors argue that effective teaching for Aboriginal peoples needs to be framed in the complexity of colonization (Deyhle & Swisher, 1997; Lipka with Mohatt, & the Ciulistet Group, 1998; Miller Cleary & Peacock, 1998) and the struggle for self-determination (Brant Castellano, Davis, & Lahache, 2000) and decolonization (Binda & Calliou, 2001). Social struggles are enacted in classroom practice where Aboriginal students can encounter an ethnocentric curriculum, authoritative relationships, racist attitudes, and prejudicial beliefs about their inferiority or deficits. Conditions such as these are intolerable for Aboriginal children, who are made to feel stupid when they cannot learn under these circumstances and fail in school. Some resist the oppression and so do not participate and drop out of school. Others, despite the obstacles, do succeed and even excel in school, maybe because they have teachers like those described below.

The Teachers

In this article I tell the stories of two teachers who demonstrate teaching students for "responsible self-direction" (Watt-Cloutier, 2000). The students in their classrooms experience autonomy and success while using their own languages, learning their own histories, and retaining their own cultures with pride. These stories are based on interviews I conducted with these teachers, who are known to be effective teachers in the communities where they teach. I had interviewed these teachers as part of my own struggle to become a better teacher and teacher educator for Aboriginal students. Roxanne² is a Dene woman from a northern community in Canada who has over 10 years experience as a teacher and

administrator in her home community. She is a fluent Dene speaker with a large extended family in the community. The other teacher, Janet, is a non-Aboriginal woman who started her teaching career in a northern Cree community and made it her home. She has over 25 years teaching experience. Both teachers have experience with various grade levels in the public and First Nations school systems.

The Need for a Sociohistorical Analysis

Aboriginal education has a legacy of assimilationist policies that were guided by the ideology of cultural deprivation and deficit. However, in their review of research, Deyhle and Swisher (1997) pointed to research conducted on cultural differences that challenged this notion of cultural deprivation when it was shown that students who were fluent in their own language or who had a strong Aboriginal cultural identity did better in schools than those who did not. Research into the problems of Aboriginal students in the education system, such as age grade displacement and low graduation rates, were instead documented in terms of institutional racism and student resistance (Ogbu, 1991; Wax, Wax, & Dumont, 1972; Wilson, 1991).

In the institutional context of oppression, Wax et al. (1972) and Wilson (1991) found that the teachers held prejudicial beliefs about the Sioux students they were teaching. They believed that the students had an inadequate home life and so did not possess the skills necessary for success in school. Students responded by forming strong peer groups to resist the pressure to conform to imposed school norms in order to preserve their identity as Sioux people. Students dropped out of school to maintain a sense of dignity and choice. Ogbu (1991) looked at oppression in the broader, societal context to compare what he calls involuntary minorities (which include Aboriginal peoples) with immigrant minorities. He found marked differences in how involuntary and immigrant minorities react to oppression in the school system and the racial stratification of the society and the economy. When comparing their present status with the future, involuntary minorities see their lack of access to economic improvement as relatively permanent, so they do not believe that education and individual effort will eliminate discrimination because it is institutionalized and enduring. They do not trust the schools or the people who control them. In the light of this, involuntary minorities believe that collective action is necessary to change the rules of the institutions and society.

In Canada collective action is taking place as First Nations, Metis and Inuit peoples struggle for self-government and self-determination. The creation of Nunavik territory, the signing of the Nisga'a treaty in British Columbia, and the forestry management agreements in Saskatchewan are indicative that Aboriginal peoples are gaining better access to the political and economic control needed to expand their economic and social opportunities.

In the light of this progress toward self-determination, the challenge for schools to meet the needs of Aboriginal students is more important than ever. Aboriginal people want education for access to a better standard of living, but with their cultures and languages intact. Educators have a long way to go to fulfill this goal. In education every situation is unique, so it is always important to consider the context, especially with the diversity of languages, cultures, and histories of the First Nations, Metis, and Inuit peoples. At the same time, factors are emerging that are important to consider in the education of Aboriginal students. Deyhle and Swisher (1997) summarize the factors to include "the successful integration of both the cultural difference position (with the inclusion of culturally specific behavior patterns and a culturally relevant curriculum) and the sociostructural position (with the equalizing of power relations between Native and Anglos)" (p. 175). In other words, effective Aboriginal education addresses issues of culture and language, community values and norms, and power relations. In addition to the above areas, effective Aboriginal education also needs to include the impact of historical and ongoing oppression of Aboriginal peoples.

Many Aboriginal authors have written about the system of colonization and the continuing effects of internalized racism (Adams, 1989; Battiste, 2000; Graveline, 1998; Miller Cleary & Peacock, 1998). Miller Cleary and Peacock discuss how internalized oppression is part of our daily life and therefore part of school interactions. Ojibwe educator, Peacock states, "We are not abstractly removed from history; we are products of it. The process of colonization, the Christianization and the 'civilization' of the indigenous people in this country continue today to affect both the colonizer and the colonized in more ways than we at first discern" (p. 60). These effects are present with the children and the teachers in the classroom.

The Teachers' Stories

These stories³ are, of course, incomplete and contain only a few brief highlights of some of the important things these teachers told me about their years of teaching. In practice, teaching is wholistic and synergistic. What teachers do in one area affects other aspects of their teaching. Often one activity serves multiple purposes. In order to describe effective teaching, the four areas of culture and language, values and norms, power relationships, and the impact of colonization were used to organize the stories. However, it quickly becomes apparent that many of teachers' activities have aspects of all four areas embedded in them. Before each section, I present a brief overview of effective practice identified by the research⁴ so the reader can view the stories in that frame.

Culture and Language

Effective teachers bring the language and culture of their Aboriginal students into the classroom to enhance learning (Deyhle & Swisher, 1997). They learn about the community (Noordhoff & Kleinfeld, 1993), are aware of cultural differences (Deyhle & Swisher), and acquaint themselves with culturally appropriate methodologies and resource materials (Farrell-Racette, Goulet, Pelletier, & Shmon, 1996). Teachers recognize that culture is dynamic and changing, so they incorporate both traditional and contemporary culture in the curriculum (Farrell-Racette et al.; Lipka et al.; Miller Cleary & Peacock, 1998; Pewewardy, 1999). Elders help to transform lived curriculum for use in the classroom and school (Lipka et al., 1998; Tompkins, 1998). Students are seen as assets and their cultural background as strengths (Deyhle & Swisher, 1997; Pewewardy, 1999). Effective teachers prepare students for life in the modern world without loss of their original culture (Pewewardy, 1999; Tompkins, 1998). In the following stories we see many of these features present.

Language and Culture: Making Connections

Roxanne, a fluent speaker, made extensive use of the Dene language in her classroom where English was the language of instruction. She spoke in Dene to make students feel comfortable and to clarify concepts for them. She translated curriculum content such as action songs into Dene so that the children could learn them in their own language first, then in English. She made her own Dene materials. In addition to using her language to clarify concepts, Roxanne thought that the language facilitated the connection between her and the students. Because they could communicate directly with her in Dene, they were not afraid to approach her as they often were with other English-speaking staff. In addition to language, Roxanne integrated the culture of the community into her curriculum by teaching according to the seasonal cycles of the community such as berry-picking in the fall, preparation for trapping during freeze-up, and trapping and fishing in the winter. Thus students learned academic skills using content that was familiar to them.

Janet used community knowledge to teach history and contextualize learning language skills in her social studies program. She had the children interview Elders and other community members, depending on the topic being covered. After being taught and role-playing interviewing skills, questions in hand, the students went out into the community in small groups. The interviews were in both Cree and English, depending on what language the child and the Elder preferred to use.

In addition to local knowledge, Janet used culturally relevant materials in her teaching. Even when there were few books available, she used what she could find and adapted it. She describes how she used one Cree Metis author's book and combined it with a teaching approach that gives pupils autonomy and choice in her grade 6 classroom.

When Maria Campbell first wrote the book *Halfbreed*, I chose appropriate portions to read to my students.... The students drew pictures of their favorite part then wrote about why they liked that part the best. We then we made a book and sent it to Maria Campbell. We were fortunate because Maria Campbell [was in the community] and came to visit us. She was really happy to receive our book and encouraged us to do more. So we made a book about her visiting the classroom with pictures. Some of the students who were really good in art did the illustrations and others who were skilled in writing did that. Then others were responsible for putting it all together while others wrote the letter to the author. [As a teacher] you make use of their special talents in every way. ... Later on they move to doing other aspects [of the group task]. (Interview, November 8, 1998, p. 15)

By using the parts of Maria Campbell's book that were appropriate to her students, Janet exposed her students to a Cree Metis author who wrote about a lifestyle and culture that the students could relate to. The approach she used resulted in bringing a role model into the class who encouraged and inspired the Cree students, enabling them to see that it was possible for an Aboriginal person to be able to write about their life and become an author. At the same time, responding to literature has a purpose and starts with students' strengths. Because most of the students were working in their second language, they started by expressing themselves through art. Their art can then serve as a way to help express themselves in writing. Also, when responding to the author's visit the students are able to choose to participate in how they will experience the most success. This story serves to illustrate how some important cultural norms and values were embedded in using Aboriginal materials in this way.

Aboriginal Values and Norms

Cultural norms and patterns of communication of the community are reflected in effective teachers' classrooms. These are often based on traditional teaching practices of many Aboriginal groups where learning is by observation and doing, and responsibility for engagement lies with the learner in order to respect individual autonomy within group interdependence (Erickson & Mohatt, 1982; Lipka et al., 1998; Philips, 1983). Thus classroom management styles are often indirect, and student autonomy is respected (Osborne, 1996). Students' preferred learning styles are observed by the teacher and may include a preference for visual learning, clarity of concepts prior to performance, and learning wholistically rather than in parts (Deyhle & Swisher, 1997). Learning preferences and community norms may be tied to the importance of choice in participation and the effectiveness of contextualizing learning (Lipka et al.). Having a real audience or purpose serves to motivate student participation (Miller Cleary & Peacock, 1998). Effective teaching methods appear to include active learning, group work with student-student interactions, and one-on-one interaction between the teacher and the student (Farrell-Racette et al., 1996; Miller Cleary & Peacock; Osborne; Philips; Tompkins, 1998). Warmth, caring, sensitivity, humor, and trust characterize teacher-student relationships and are combined with high expectations (Farrell-Racette;

Kleinfeld, 1972; Lipka et al.; Miller Cleary & Peacock). At the heart of many Aboriginal world views is the importance of relationship. Tewa educator Greg Cajete (1994) sees relationship as the "cornerstone of community" (p. 164), which lies at the heart of Aboriginal education. When asked about their own effective teaching, both teachers stated that *relationship* was a key component.

Relationships: Visiting with Students

Both teachers conveyed a deep sense of caring for their students. Janet spoke of having love for her students with the need for a teacher to be genuine in that love. Roxanne remarked that she must have a big heart because she had room in it for the love of all the students she had taught over the years. Both teachers emphasized the need to get to know and accept each student as an individual, to recognize and acknowledge that each has a special talent or gift. In order to achieve this goal, at the beginning of the school year Janet would try to interact with her students outside the structured and formalized setting of school in order to talk to them individually. In their conversations she could find out what their interests and talents were.

Roxanne talked about the importance of informal, personal dialogue or visiting with the children, an important cultural practice, especially in northern Aboriginal communities (Goulet & Aubichon, 1997). She did this not only to get to know the students better, but as a way to make sure that they felt welcome and comfortable in the classroom.

I have learned to just kind of open my heart and say, "Come in. This is our day. We're going to work" and it's successful. [We did a] lot of sharing, a lot of talking, a lot of dialogue, a lot of just ordinary talking. I let them know that I'm just as human as their mother and their father and that I had feelings. [We'd talk] about their feelings. I'd ask, "Okay, what's happening in your home right now?" ... [Often we spent] a good half-hour when they came in. (Interview, February 16, 1999, p. 2)

It was important to Roxanne that children saw her classroom as a welcoming, safe place where they could share their personal lives, express their emotions, and have those emotions acknowledged.

Both teachers took the time to build warm, close human relationships with their students. Relationships, especially those between a teacher and student, involve power. How power is used in a relationship can either develop trust or mistrust. Deyhle and Swisher (1997) believe that the level of trust between students and teachers is crucial to understanding why some students are able to learn in classrooms and others are not. Learning involves moving into the unknown, which requires the student to take a risk. "If a student does not trust the teacher or has reason to fear humiliation, rejection, or being revealed as incompetent, the risk to learn is too great" (p. 164). Both teachers also shared stories about dealing with students that showed their use of an indirect, nonconfrontational approach to classroom management. They used humor and often laughed at them-

selves and with the students. Although caring was at the center of the relationship with students, this did not mean that these teachers did not challenge their students academically. Part of caring was to have high expectations for the students. They believed that their students could succeed and conveyed this belief to their students.

Community Relationships: Inviting Them in

Building relationships extended beyond the classroom to the parents and the community, where teachers sought support for their students' learning. Each teacher had her own way of getting families and parents involved. Janet started the year by taking her young students on a field trip to gather wild mint, Labrador tea, or rose hips, and then had the children invite their grandparents to the school for bannock with rose hip jelly and tea. Although the family was invited, the tea was especially for the grandparents. "[I invited grandparents because] grandparents and little children have a real bond. That was just one way of involving them in the school and in the children's learning. While the grandparents were there they would visit and tell stories" (Interview, November 8, 1998, p. 1).

In this series of activities, Janet has taken the children out onto the land to engage in traditional activities with a purpose. Elders were introduced to and welcomed into the classroom in an informal situation, with tea and bannock, just as visiting takes place in the home. Respecting and valuing community ways of being also included recognition of the importance of grandparents in the lives of the young students. "Elders link the coming generations with the teachings of past generations. The cultural teachings are the foundation of the Aboriginal peoples identity" (RCAP, vol. 4, pp. 116-117). The importance of this intergenerational link is embedded in the Cree word *aniskotapan* (grandchild). In Swampy Cree the root words of *aniskotapan* are *anis*, which means connectedness, and *otape*, which is to pull or carry, so the literal translation of *aniskotapan* is one who is connected and pulled or carried along (K. Goulet, personal communication, 1998).

Roxanne connected with the students' families in other ways. At the beginning of the year she had a "meet the teacher" night for students' families where she explained her program for the coming year and families shared information regarding their child. She also asked parents about the skills they had. This meeting not only provided her with valuable information about her students such as family situations or any pertinent medical conditions, but also gave her an overview of community knowledge and skills possessed by the parents that she would use in her classroom in the coming year. She continued to have community parent meetings throughout the year.

Equalizing Power Relations

Effective teachers of Aboriginal students learn about and recognize colonization. By using cultural norms in the classroom, teachers share

power in their classroom by developing and respecting student autonomy. They challenge discriminatory practices and stereotypes (Farrell-Racette et al., 1996; Osborne, 1996). Traditional colonial relations between the teacher and community are replaced by meaningful participation of the community in school curriculum and by actively pursuing family involvement and support (Farrell-Racette et al.; Lipka et al., 1998; Miller Cleary & Peacock, 1998).

Changing Colonial Power Relationships: Working as Partners

In the above stories, it is evident that even in the initial relationship with students, parents and grandparents, both teachers sought places and ways to develop relationships outside the formal relationships of teaching with its inherent or assumed hierarchical structure. Schools can be intimidating places for any parent, but especially for parents whose own experiences with schooling may not be favorable and in some cases may be painful. Past colonial relationships have been those of authority, control, and decision-making occurring outside the Aboriginal community. In contrast, these teachers sought to form relationships that were more like partnerships where all are on the same journey together.

The Swampy Cree have an important concept for a specific kind of relationship in their culture, and this is *weechiyauguneetowin* (partnership). The late Moise Dussion was an Elder who lived a traditional lifestyle, hunting, trapping, and fishing in the Cumberland House area of Saskatchewan. In an interview with Keith Goulet (1990), when asked in Cree what the most important relationship to him as a Cree was, Moise Dussion replied that it was *weechiyauguneetowin*. In Swampy Cree, *weechi* means to help and *weechew* means to go with or accompany. *Weechiyauguneetowin* means to be partnered with someone to go and do things together like trapping or in a contemporary context is used to refer to being on the same team in a game (K. Goulet, personal communication, 2001). Although *weechiyauguneetowin* is not used to refer to a teaching situation, the Cree connotation of partnership is evident in the way these teachers describe how to approach and work with both students and parents.

Roxanne said even as an administrator, she never put herself in an authority position with students or parents. She felt as if she was "in there with them, students and parents." This stance with parents is illustrated in an incident where Roxanne was confronted by an angry parent. The parent was being aggressive, going on and on. Roxanne patiently listened, nonverbally getting the parent to sit and calm down. Rather than reacting in anger herself, she said,

"I'm here as a partner, you as a parent and me as an administrator and as a teacher, to help your child. I mean we're all in this together and we need to work with your son." We developed a good relationship because of that, because I didn't say, "Well, I'm the principal, I'm the authority, and you have to listen to what I say." I never did that. I said, "How can you help me and how can I help you? (Interview, February 16, 1998, p. 6)

Roxanne interpreted this parent's anger as concern for the child. By viewing the parent's action this way, the parent is seen not as a threat, but as another adult who will work to support the child's school achievement.

Janet talked about trying to establish a more equitable relationship with students through having students take ownership of different class activities such as putting on a community fish fry to raise money for a class trip.

[This kind of activity is crucial because] I think there has been a stigma attached to authority generally, and the teacher is seen as an authority figure. For students to realize that you're a human being, like their parents or others in the community is important. As a teacher, you have something to share with them and they have something to share with you. Learning is not just a one-way process, but as a teacher you're there to guide them. If you don't know something, you can find somebody who does and all learn at the same time. You can build on everybody's learning. (Interview, November 8, 1998, pp. 2-3)

Having students take ownership of activities conveys a philosophy of partnership and learning together and develops students' planning and decision-making skills.

The Impact of Colonization

Colonization was and is an oppressive system that strives to subjugate a group of people to keep them from having equitable access to the economic opportunities and social privileges enjoyed and taken for granted by the members of the colonizing group. Historical and ongoing colonization has a major impact on Aboriginal communities causing, among other things, disempowerment and poverty. Miller Cleary and Peacock (1998) state that the losses suffered in Aboriginal communities as a result of colonization were so great that communities still suffer from the effects. This leads to self-destructive behaviors. Problems of poverty, alcohol and drug abuse, violence, racism, and class conflict affect the school. For the students themselves, the historic and continuing oppression gives many of them a sense of powerlessness and hopelessness so that life problems can be overwhelming. Many students lack belief in themselves and have low self-esteem.

Recent research has begun to document how effective teachers deal with the impact of colonization on their students. First, teachers recognize that the poverty and social problems in the community are a result of the system of colonization (Miller Cleary & Peacock, 1998). They make allowances in their teaching for students who are dealing with personal problems and poverty in a respectful, sensitive way (Tompkins, 1998). Their teaching activities produce student success, develop confidence, and engender pride that builds positive self-esteem.

Colonial Practice in School: Not Submitting

Roxanne and Janet recognized the effects of oppression on the community and on the lives of their students outside and inside the classroom. In the interviews, the two teachers did not refer directly to oppression or racism,

although both of them had challenged racist policies in their early teaching in public schools. When Janet first started teaching many years ago, she was told not to let her pupils use Cree in her kindergarten class where most of the children did not speak English. She ignored this directive and had the children teach her Cree as she taught them English. When Roxanne began teaching in her home community, she was the only certified Aboriginal teacher on staff. At the first staff meeting of the year, the superintendent told the staff that they were there to teach, not to mix with the community, a standard directive at the beginning of the school term for teachers new to the north. She merely asked if she was supposed to ignore her mother and father, her sisters and brothers, and all her other relatives and friends when she ran into them while shopping in the Coop store. The absurdity of the directive was not lost on those present. Although at the time of these incidents each was a beginning teacher with not much power in the system, these teachers were able to affect what they perceived to be unjust school practices.

Issues: Recognizing Stress, Developing Self-Esteem and Identity

In addition to challenging colonizing beliefs and practices in the school, neither teacher ignored the effects of colonization and resulting social problems in the community. Attending to issues of poverty and dysfunction in the community does not mean thinking less of the students or their families. It means that the teacher adjusts her teaching and expectations for engagement and participation because she is aware of how the social stresses are affecting the child. Roxanne talked about the alcoholism and poverty in her community. Children sometimes came to school hungry. There were other times when they did not go home to eat because of what was going on. Roxanne emphasized the need for having food for children and not making a "big deal" of it when a child needed it: to deal with difficult home situations with sensitivity. She also recognized the effect of colonization on the parents. She was aware of the loss of parenting skills brought about by attendance at residential schools. One of the purposes of her community parent nights was to teach parents the skills needed to help their children succeed in school.

In the classroom both teachers used culturally relevant methods to deal with student stress. Both used visual means to observe children carefully. Roxanne was always at the door of the classroom to greet her students when they came in the morning. That way she could tell from their facial expressions what kind of night they had had and could adjust her teaching and expectations for participation accordingly.

In addition to visual cues, Janet had circle meetings as a time to assess her expectations for the child that day.

I had circle meetings in the morning and afternoon. In the morning I would establish where the child was at that time, because there were a lot of problems in the community ... They'd be feeling sad or angry. They would express what they were feeling and didn't have to tell why just as long as they let people know how they were feeling ... Being a small

community you often knew what was going on, but not always. There may have been something going on in a particular home that you didn't know about. You may try and get a child to do something and get aggravated with them if you didn't know what was going on with them. If you did know, you would go easier and find another way to get them to do what you wanted them to do, or let them do something else that was related. Or maybe they weren't able to do anything at that time. They needed some time out. (Interview, November 8, 1998)

These circle meetings provided a time and place where the child could express and let go of negative feelings. It also made the teacher aware of problems the student may be facing outside school so that she could adjust her interactions accordingly.

The end-of-day circle time addressed another issue related to colonization: the low self-esteem of students. The purpose of this meeting was to build positive self-esteem. The teacher developed a "pride" board where the children would be asked to identify something they were proud of for that day. At afternoon circle time children were given the opportunity to share with others what they were proud of and put it up on the board. Although they were hesitant at first, "in the end they took a lot of pride in the things they did" (Interview, November 8, 1998).

Roxanne had her own ways of building a child's self-esteem. She used close observation of a child to come to know the kind of teaching the student would respond to. She talked about one boy in particular who did not attend school much, except the year he was in her class. He was in grade 4, but functioning at a readiness reading level.

I think he attended school in my class because I made him feel good about himself, inside. There were some problems that he had. You know there are some kids where they talk a lot and they sound like, "Oh they know, they're very smart," but give them a pen and they don't know what to do. I saw that right away so I always [approached him differently], just to make him feel okay, like "I know what I'm doing." If we were to stand up and read, I'd kind of by-pass him, and some kids would say, "He didn't read." And I'd say, "Well he's kind of made up his own story in his mind already. Can you tell us about that hunting trip you told me?" and so of course he's talking away [telling an oral story]. I think just by making him feel good about himself and giving him a lot of little responsibilities [helped] ... He was very, very knowledgeable. He was 10 at the time and he could go hunting on his own—on his very own. So I used a lot of [his knowledge of hunting] ... I made him believe that he was very successful that year. (Interview, November 6, 1998)

This teacher was able to make this boy feel successful by quickly identifying his academic level. She was able to get him to participate in classroom activities in a way that would not embarrass him, but instead drew on his strengths, making him feel competent in her class. What enabled her to do that was her connections in the community. Knowing the child meant she knew of his strength in cultural knowledge and was able to build on it in learning in the classroom.

Colonization has played havoc with Aboriginal identity. The residential school experience was part of this process where everything Indian, including the language, was forbidden and the student's "supposedly

inferior Indian identity was deliberately stripped away" (Brendtro Brokenleg, & Van Bockern, 1992, p. 44). Partly because of her own negative experiences with cultural identity in school, Roxanne expressed concern regarding the cultural identity of the students she was teaching. Coming full circle from the beginning of this article, in addition to integrating culture in the classroom, Roxanne started having cultural trips where she would take the students (some of whom had never been) into the bush to set up a camp. On one particular trip the students flew to an island that was part of the traditional hunting territory of the Dene before they settled into their present day community. The trip had a profound effect on the students and on Roxanne as well.

It really hit me. On that trip we talked about the history, we talked about Dene, and I was really trying to instill the pride. We talked about many years ago, "This is tradition and where our ancestors used to come by" and "This is how children lived." [When it was time to leave] nobody wanted to go ... The plane took off and they were all crying. I said, "Why are you crying?" "Because," they said, "I can't explain it to you. But I feel really sad. There's something missing in our life. I mean is this the way we lived?"—you know, just connecting back. So we did a whole a lot of journal writing when we got back in the classroom, just so they could tell me what it was they felt they were missing. They said, "We weren't taught that. So this is how Dene lived. Why was I not told?" ... I said, "Start asking your parents and your grandparents. They have so much knowledge." (Interview, February 16, 1999, pp. 19-20)

The students followed up this incident with interviews of community members that have now become a part of Roxanne's teaching. This trip and the ensuing follow-up let the students explore the feelings of being denied the knowledge of their own people's history. But the teacher responded to the students by using the incident as an opportunity for the students to learn about where they came from and connect to their past. In doing so, they developed "that connection to their identity" (Interview, February 16, 1999, p. 20).

In their own ways, both teachers dealt with the issues of poverty and social problems in the communities. They each found ways to help students express and cope with these issues in a way that was positive for the student, developed their self-esteem and identity, and gave students a reason to continue coming to school.

Summary

The stories illustrate how these teachers attended to issues of both culture and colonization. In a wholistic way, Roxanne and Janet incorporated culture and language and Aboriginal and community norms and values into their teaching. They did so in a way that developed more equitable power relationships and dealt with the impact of colonization. It was not only what they did, but how they did it that was important (Tompkins, 1998). The stories tell of interrelationship and connections of people, to each other, to their past, and to present-day realities. The stories are not complete, but are part of the ongoing investigation into how teachers can

overcome colonial practices and move with communities, families, and students to “responsible self-direction.”

Conclusion

As evidenced in the teaching of these two teachers, the teaching of Aboriginal students needs to consider the different contexts of the individual, community, and larger society. In summarizing the direction needed to advance research and practice in Aboriginal education, Swisher and Tippeconnic (1999) state that education needs to be viewed holistically, that what happens in school cannot be separated from the daily lives of teachers and students or the communities where it takes place. To them, “the primary focus of research and practice must be the teaching-learning relationship between students and teachers” (p. 302). As teachers we need to connect with our students, recognizing that each student is a part of a family and a community—a community with a history. We need to connect with families and communities in order to affirm, value, and include the language, cultural practices, and knowledge of the people in a meaningful way, in partnership, in order to overcome the past colonial practices in schooling. At the same time, we need to pay attention to the present realities of the communities where we teach and live. We have a responsibility to participate in the struggle against the continuing effects of oppression, because effective teaching practice takes place in relationship with the teacher, student, family, school, community, as well as the broader society, keeping in mind that all of us are situated in, and affected by, the complex historical contexts of culture, race, and class.

Notes

¹In different parts of Canada and the United States different terms are preferred to denote the original peoples of North America. As designated in the Canadian constitution, I use the term *Aboriginal* in order to be inclusive of First Nations, Metis, and Inuit peoples who are each recognized as distinct groups. Where possible I use the name of the specific Aboriginal nation being referred to.

²Pseudonyms are used in this article to protect the confidentiality of the people of the communities that these teachers are from.

³In using quotations from the teachers, I edited the raw data to take out repetition to make the text more readable.

⁴Due to the plethora of writing on Aboriginal education, in referring to the research on effective teaching I include only those studies that summarize past research or use ethnographic approaches such as classroom observation, interview, or participant observation.

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