

Clowning Tops Hip Hop:
Reflections on Teaching at a First Nations School

by

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Bachelor of English, University of Calgary, 1989

Bachelor of Education, Simon Fraser University, 2005

A Project Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

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Abstract

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This project, which is informed by narrative inquiry, examines one teacher's experiences as she navigated pedagogical challenges of teaching storytelling and hip hop in a First Nations school. The combination of changing educational contexts: shifting from teaching adults to teaching Indigenous youth had a significant outcome on the teacher's initial attempts to move through the anticipated curriculum. A critical examination of the literature regarding teaching storytelling and hip hop across cultural boundaries, combined with personal journaling of her emergent teaching experiences, led the teacher to an effective and highly successful method of supporting learning through exploring clown and play, among other factors, to achieve enhanced relationships with her students. The project concludes with a description of considerations of personal, contextual, and theoretical factors which impacted her practice and the students' experiences as well as recommendations for teachers beginning to work with First Nations students or other minority groups.

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Chapter One: Introduction

In this first chapter, I explain how I have come to this project as well as how my interests and goals fuel this work.

My Background as Clown-Teacher

I am a clown and teacher. All my students know this. I began my own clown training with Cheryl Cashman in 1999 while attending Kootenay School of the Arts. I graduated with my B. Ed. from Simon Fraser University in 2004, and resumed my clown training in Uruguay in 2007. In 2009, I was invited to join the national professional Uruguayan theatre group, *Clowndestino*, where I collaborated on shows, taught workshops, and played the lead role in a touring production.

Most of my previous formal teaching experience has been at the post-secondary level in either Spanish, English Language Arts or English as a Second Language instruction. Currently, along with teaching a citizenship course and invigilating exams at the Multicultural Society, I work in long term care facilities as a therapeutic clown. As well, I am a full time teacher in a Grade 7/ 8 class at a First Nations community school on Vancouver Island in British Columbia, Canada. I bring to this present work all of my past experience, but what fuels me most is clowning. As a clown, I have trained in improvisation and performance techniques but I have also developed my intuition, my ability to connect with the audience, and my storytelling skills. Storytelling is the joy and fuel of a clown. After all, a clown does not come out if there is nothing to communicate, to share, or to tell.

I believe that teaching draws on our skills, our caring and our intuition. I have developed my teaching skills through practice in the profession, yet I believe that my

ability to convey caring and to intuit the needs of my students comes from my clown training and experience. A clown is in service to the scene just as a teacher is in service to the learning. The clown uses intuition to guide him or her in choosing the next action just as a teacher must understand her students to offer the next learning opportunity. I also ascribe to Ted Aoki's (1986/2005) notion that the teacher is the teaching. To me this means that my clown training, my presence, my playfulness and the way that I model caring and self-compassion for my students will be part of the experienced/learned curriculum. As I develop my project, I wonder how I can encourage even more demonstration of these qualities within my students.

As a clown teacher, I believe that my role is to lead students back to themselves so that they can develop their unique gifts. In this way, my focus is not on content but on that which Freire's (2005) details in his explanation of the construction of true dialogue as the vehicle for learning. It is in that dialogue that students discover and develop their unique selves. As both John Addams and Nel Nodding purport, I too believe that students must be known by themselves, each other and by me, their teacher, in a learner-centered and caring environment. (Addams, 1908; Nodding, 2007). They must know that they matter to me, the teacher, as well as to others in the community and that they bring to class a triumphant amount of knowledge and insight in the form of their "unique frame of reference" (Wagamese, 2012, p.12).

What is a Clown?

Typically a modern day clown is thought to be a humorous character with bright clothing and big shoes who makes people (especially children) laugh but this popular icon has little to do with the age old, universal role of a contrary character that is found in

cultures across the world. “The character of ‘The Fool’ is an essential ingredient of human society - a universal archetype found in some form in all cultures and in all times. The Clown is the "puer aeternus" who sees things as they really are” (Henderson, n.p.). Sue Morrison, world renowned Canadian clown teacher blatantly states that clown work is shamanic work which fulfils an important role in society. One of her adages is that clowns must learn and teach how to “see ourselves in all directions and laugh at the beauty of our ridiculousness” (Coburn, 2013). Her training includes working with First Nations elements and the four directions.

Vivien Gladwell, the European teacher of Bataclown and Nose to Nose clowning, sees clowns as healers because they epitomize the human condition and embody the contraction between individuals and society through play (Seeley, 2008). A clown, like a young child, does not defend itself from its own emotions and shows these emotions authentically through its eyes and visage. The effect on the audience is one of catharsis. When a clown shares the shame of making a mistake and walks through this shame in full view of his/ her audience, somehow, the audience becomes complicit in the experience and also purges themselves of their negative emotion. Therefore, clowns can also help to heal emotional pain.

All cultures contain at least one character with clown attributes. In some traditional First Peoples societies, a clown performed a shamanistic role, often working with the priest or even playing both roles. It is even said that some First Peoples societies believed that some knowledge could only be accessed through laughter (Proctor, 2013). A ceremony could be interrupted at its most intense point to interject humour or a contrary view. Indeed, in the Sun Dance ceremony, the heyókħa, the sacred clown,

functions as both a mirror and a teacher by portraying contrary aspects and offering paradoxical perspectives.

Western thinking has sometimes reduced the trickster figures of Coyote and Raven to childlike mischief-makers or light hearted fools but traditionally, the trickster, another clown figure, illuminated the shadow side of society and by transgressing, served to shape cultural codes. Paradoxically, by violating cultural norms, tricksters could help define the accepted boundaries.

The modern day clown “takes everything literally and personally, questioning everything under the sun except itself, blithely flaunting the egg on its face and the heart on its sleeve. With the best of intentions and no thought of failure, it leaps naively into danger - getting knocked down over and over - but never failing to get up and try again” (Henderson, n.d.). In its folly, the clown prompts its audience to consider things in a different way, possibly to allow the weak and marginalized to exercise power, or at least promote laughter to dispel stress and anger.

How Does a Clown Work?

First, to become a clown is not so much a skill that must be developed as a part of ourselves that we can uncover. Every person can enjoy the humour that is inherent in clown and play. “Any time that we are curious, playful, or creative, we are in clown mode. When we are in a state of wonder or awe, surprise or amazement, we are in clown. Whenever we have hunches, act on impulse, or digress - we are in clown... Clowning is about the freedom that comes from a state of total, unconditional acceptance of our most authentic selves” (Henderson, n. d.). Clown is a state of being. Clown training involves

developing intuition to serve the play or game that is offered, conveying an authentic presence, connecting with the audience, and some stage techniques.

A clown turn is a brief scene in which the clown enters the stage and shares with the audience. This can also be the moment when a therapeutic clown enters in to a room to have a visit with a patient or when a clown teacher pauses to initiate some type of play with her students. The criteria: to be present to bursting, authentic with no mask, no hiding. The clown works for the scene's sake, following the impulse with no mind for judgment. If the clown/teacher is fully present and listening, transformation will occur and learning will happen.

A clown has an intention, or a direction but in that space, the clown, with heightened intuition, serves the moment and the people in it. This means that the scene is created in collaboration with the audience. An actor may perform a memorized scene with little concern for those who are watching. In contrast, the clown has no fourth wall. He/she looks directly at the audience and is alive to their interest, their ideas, their laughter and their discomfort.

Teachers can also see themselves in this role. The clown is in service to the scene just as the teacher is in service to the learning. Just as a clown has an intention, the teacher has an intended learning outcome. She collaborates with her class to reach the learning goals and in this, the teacher witnesses the learning within herself and within her students.

A clown never operates without a connection with her audience. For example, when a clown is in the scene or working a hospital room, she communicates through eye contact and responds to those who are with her. There is a link, the perpetual caring link,

between the clown and the other. The game is created together; the shared experience could be considered a 'Freirean' dialogue. In this: to be awake, to sense the moment, there is energy, delight, surprise and the shared experience of fumbling toward understanding. Can these two seemingly juxtaposed roles of teacher and clown be reconciled?

I believe that they can. In the following clown exercise, I explain how one exercise offers a good analogy for the experience of clown. In this final exercise of a beginner's workshop, the class formed a circle and two new clowns entered into the center, looked into each other's eyes, and joined hands. They began to spin and spin, leaning out from each other. The group contained them as they lost their individual balance and became whirling dervishes with a shared axis. Their focus, fixed point, was on the eyes of the other. They spun faster than either could have imagined and when the spinning slowed, laughter and heady exhilaration followed. This is clown. We present ourselves. We connect. We share an experience and we transform, over and over. I believe this to be teaching and learning as well.

Learning as Healing

During one of my recent M. Ed. courses, I was introduced to the First Peoples' Principles of Learning from the BC Ministry of Education (2012) and felt that they matched my own values. In particular, I was drawn to the first principle, that learning ultimately supports the well-being of the self, the family, the community, the land, the spirits and the ancestors. This idea was new to me. I had never thought that learning could be healing. I began to think of ways that this could be true. I was also drawn to the images and ideas provoked by the sixth principle: Learning is embedded in memory, time

and story (2012). I believe that memory is housed in the body as well as the mind (Mate, 2000, p.56) so to think that story lives there too is also thought provoking. Gregory Cajete, who wrote the seminal work, *Look to the mountain: An ecology of indigenous education*, has reinforced this notion, “we learn through our bodies and spirits as much as our minds” (1994).

Research Questions

In my current teaching role teaching, I continually ask myself, “Who do students see when they look at me, their teacher?” “How can I, their non-Aboriginal teacher connect across this chasm of perceived difference?” “How can I build rapport?” “How can I make deep learning happen?” “How can I increase their sense of safety to enable them to learn?” “How can I be a positive agent in our mutual decolonization?”

What follows is the exploration of curriculum and topics which I imagined would lead me to answer these questions. Although I have previously used clown techniques to play with the notion of status, vulnerability, ‘correctness,’ and authority in the classroom, I believed that an exploration of the clown teacher in the classroom was not academic enough for a M.Ed. project, and that I needed another vehicle, even two, to bring answers to my questions.

‘Storying’ My Project

The idea to focus on stories that we tell came during the morning of day two in this new assignment. I had thought that the students, grieving from the loss of their other teacher and reeling with my new way of running the classroom, would at least be able to show respect for Elders. So I invited the school’s Elders to tell stories to the class. They spoke of running away from home and living on their own during in the summer of their

eleventh year while their fathers were out commercial fishing. The students were enthralled and wanted more and more stories, so I invited the principal to tell his stories. He spoke about his first deer hunting trip. The project gained some momentum. One Friday, an education assistant shared the national news story of his great grandfather who was recently inducted into the National Soccer Hall of Fame. Many students are usually so inhibited that they do not take part in class discussions but in this circumstance students actually had questions and gathered around him after the class.

I began to wonder if the clown teacher could create enough safety in the classroom for this to take place. I asked myself, “How could I use story in the classroom to promote wellness, to learn and to heal? How could I develop my students’ confidence enough that they would think that their stories were worth hearing?”

Then I invited a local hip hop singer to give a presentation to my students about taking care of their feelings and caring for themselves. This changed everything.

To begin with the students were reluctant participants in the presentation to but as the hip hop player told about difficulties he had growing up, I could see their body language softening. When he sang the songs that came out of his stories, the students were visibly moved. The artist sang a song about the effects of bullying, for example, using an anecdote from his own childhood. In fact, one student, usually intent on joking and being distracted by other students, moved seats so that he could listen uninterrupted to “Words are like Weapons” (Dunae, Kristinsen, 2014, n.p.). At the end of the performance, the performer was surrounded by students with a bevy of questions. I had never seen this amount of engagement. It exceeded the interest in any activity or story that we had been involved in. I had to pursue this. My M. Ed. project inquiry morphed to

become an inquiry into how I might set up classroom learning experiences so that students can take in stories from around them and develop those within themselves; to then transform their stories to re-tell in their own form and manner. After all, “hip hop is a dominant language of youth culture. Those of us who work with young people need to speak their language” (Deleon, 2005 as cited in Akom, 2009, p. 53).

Rationale for My Project

The factory based model to “train thought and judgment in connection with actual life situations” (Bobbitt, 1918, p. 11) does not work for the majority of Indigenous students. Many Indigenous students do not graduate from high school or pursue post-secondary education, yet most Aboriginal people are under the age of twenty five and represent a significant component of the workforce of tomorrow (“The Aboriginal population”, 2015). They are an important part of Canada’s potential.

“Curriculum in Canada, as institutional texts and practices, reinforces normative definitions of ... racial categories, stereotypes, and distinctions, and perpetuates racial/class distinctions in the society at large” (Chambers, 2003, p. 249.). The education system is flawed, whether it is the program, or its delivery or its ‘deliverers,’ the systems ‘invisiblizes’ minority cultures, especially Aboriginal culture. Indigenous students may feel disenfranchised, disillusioned and even despondent about the education system. The situation is untenable as it is.

Even though Maria Montessori (1912) wrote in Europe almost a century ago, her work is relevant today. She uses the metaphor of the “national desk,” (p.26) to explain the discomfort that students feel to be trapped in a confining space and then elaborates: “pupils,...are subjected to this regime which, even though they were born straight and

strong, made it possible for them to become hunchbacked”(p.26). The school desk is a source of pride for educators but Montessori challenged its use; she thinks it is “incomprehensible that so-called science should have worked to perfect an instrument of slavery in the schools” (p. 27). This image and the exaggerated interpretation of it illustrate two main issues: that the education system is not sufficiently flexible to adjust to the needs of all students and second, the education system uses methods that can harm students and even ‘enslave’ or disempower them by making invisible their identities and robbing them of their self-esteem.

Drastic change must take place to make education responsive to the needs of Indigenous learners. As Counts encouraged teachers in his 1932 essay, *Dare the School Build a New Social Order*, “Men and women who have affected the course of human events are those who have not hesitated to use the power that has come to them” (p. 46). Teachers have the power and also the responsibility to enact social justice. Complicating this difficult situation though, is that most teachers of Indigenous students and other minorities groups are from the dominant culture and are sometime hesitant to embark on such a complicated journey to reach across cultural boundaries.

Why Me?

I am interested in the idea of revolutionary critical pedagogy which demands that people repeatedly question their roles in society as either agents of social and economic transformation, or, as those who blindly participate in unbalanced relations of power and privilege. My personal history is one of much change, having lived in five different countries and visited many more. I recognize that culture is not housed in the outside trappings of a society: "culture is the collective programming of the mind which

distinguishes the members of one category of people from another" (Hofstede, 1984 p. 51). I believe that I have developed a responsiveness, a self-awareness and a respect for other cultures.

To explain, I spent 15 years on Haida Gwaii where the Haida culture is the dominant culture. It is commonly accepted that there are just two kinds of people who live on Haida Gwaii: Haida and non-Haida. During my years there I taught on and off reserve as well as at the local college. As a member of the minority culture, I had to continually be aware of my own cultural programming and adapt to the dominant cultural way.

Next I moved to Uruguay. Coming from my experience in Haida Gwaii, I was already comfortable in the role of other. Uruguay had survived a 12 year long dictatorship and a large percentage of the population had either fled persecution or clammed up completely. Here, without the language as a tool, I learned to read the nuances of culture: body language, how emotions were followed, suppressed, denied. I taught adults, primarily, and adjusted to the ways inherent in the people I lived and worked with.

After 5 years in Uruguay, my family and I landed in the thick heat and tension of the state of Georgia. Sensitive to the racial tensions between Afro-Americans, Latinos and the dominant culture, our family negotiated our path. Here, I worked on a research project to investigate how illegal immigrants perceived the school experience of their (legal) children. I felt my greatest impact during this project was not in the actual interviewing and transcription. I felt that in casual conversations with the other researchers, I could impart how my lived understanding of being the 'other' meant

continually accommodating the dominant culture. I felt that I had learned and could share how the dominant culture has a blind spot to comprehend how its values are perpetuated while other cultures' values are made invisible.

Upon my return to Canada, I have had various teaching roles. I feel that my self-identity is strong. I believe that I have a breadth of experience to understand how little I may know about another's situation and I respect the entirety of my students and who they are. I recognize the inherent power structure of the classroom and the power that I am given as teacher. I 'play' with this power. I discuss it openly, use clown and theatre techniques to ridicule it and to ensure the comfort of my students. In the classroom, I am not the intrepid leader who directs her students through the mandated curriculum content. When I plan my curriculum, I ask, "How will we crawl through this muck all together?" and then we do. Could I have this same success with this group of Indigenous youth? Could I bridge the gap between us?

Why Am I Drawn to Indigenous Education?

We have a shared history in Canada. Indigenous voices matter and the Indigenous perspective is an integral part of who we are and will become. Indigenous knowledge matters. The age of 'post colonialism' is on the horizon and as Dr. W. Hutton (2013) discussed in our first course that began this Master's program, 'post' in this context does not refer to the time following an event but refers to the idea that we would lift up the structure of colonialism and investigate, even dissect it, to see how it has influenced our culture, our frame of reference and especially, our education system (personal communication, July 11, 2013).

Jane Addams' 1908 work, *The Public School and the Immigrant Child*, could have been written in 2015 and titled "The Public School and the Aboriginal child." When I read her work, I was driven to substitute the word, aboriginal, for immigrant. The similarities are astounding. First, she explained that one of the results of education is that, "in spite of the enormous advantages which the public school gives these children, it in some way loosens them from the authority and control of their parents (and culture) and tends to send them, without sufficient rudder and power of self-direction, into the perilous business of living" (p.41). She further explains how "easy it is to cut (students) loose from their parents (and culture), it requires cultivation to tie them up in sympathy and understanding" (p.42).

In addition, she discusses the role of teachers and their axiology. She insists that students will not learn to be good mothers, (although the example could be something less pervasive) without learning to be good daughters. She exhorts that, "the cultivated teacher fastens students" (p. 42). In this, I think she means that the teacher forms connections that matter both within the classroom and with the knowledge itself. She continues, "The cultivated teacher connects and gives the child the beginnings of a culture so wide and deep and universal that he can interpret his own parents and countrymen by a standard that is worldwide and not provincial" (p.42).

A modern day interpretation may be that students should see their relationships between their own culture, the school culture and the dominant culture with clearer vision. She further centralizes the studies not on a factory model of knowledge and skill acquisition for an end goal, nor on the roles that one must assume in life, she proposes the idea that the students study the most basic food which nourishes, soothes, calms and

forms their foundation for life: milk (p.42). I think that this metaphor relates to my own work in that my students' need to study that which is relevant to them in the context of the school culture. Not only do students listen to hip hop perpetually, (even secretly in class,) they have prior knowledge in this particular form of contemporary cultural expression to legitimately bring to class. By using popular culture and accessing hip hop as a vehicle for learning, could students become more engaged?

Pablo Freire's work (1970/2013) in "conscientizacao" (p. 162) is another motivating work for me. He discusses the reciprocity of teaching -- "dialogue is an act of creation" (p.160) -- and the important attitudes, humility among them that the educator must hold: "At the point of encounter, there are neither utter ignoramuses nor perfect sages; there are only men who are attempting, together to learn more than they know" (p.158). The teacher is a co-investigator in action and together, the students and teacher 'post' colonialism up, almost as if it were a billboard or a sign post, to investigate it and deconstruct its constituent parts. Can I position myself as co-investigator?

Why Story?

"All that we are is story. From the moment we are born to the time we continue on our spirit journey, we are involved in the creation of the story of our time here. It is what we arrive with. It is all we leave behind (Wagamese, 2002, p.63).

First, I wanted to connect with Indigenous storytelling as I believed that this traditional learning tool would be familiar and comfortable to students. Historically, Jane Addams (1908) explains: "If schools could get the children to bring these things (their traditional stories) into school as the material from which culture is made and the material

upon which culture is based, they would discover that... which (teachers) give them now is a poor, meretricious and vulgar thing”(p. 43).

There is a plethora of literature that acknowledges how the generation of one’s own story develops self-identity and strengthens the voice, resolve and confidence of a student. Kliebard (1975) acknowledges that we learn the governing principles of language and the power within them from our own creations: “we do not learn language by anticipating all of the sentences we will utter in our adult lives and then rehearsing them... We learn or assimilate or perhaps even inherit the governing principles of language that permit us to create and invent sentences” (p. 74). Even Bruner’s well known Man: a Course of Study (MACOS) program (1966) could be viewed as a great course in telling the story of man from different perspectives as any question asking “how?” is a request for a story (p.80). In the contemporary literature, Mezirow’s transformation theory explains how students could reformulate meaning structures that no longer serve them by reconstructing dominant narratives,” (Mezirow & Associates as cited in Ashby, p.8, 2000) and they do this by working with their own stories.

Relationships are built in the development and sharing of our self-knowledge and our unique frame of reference on the world. We write ourselves into existence when we write and share our stories. I want to acknowledge the profound effect that Dr. Richard Wagamese has on my view of curriculum. First, he advocates for story. “We are hard wired for story” (2012, p.12). Next, he recognizes the healing power of this work: “Story telling is a spiritual endeavor” (p. 22). And most importantly, he insists that the teacher is part of the transformative process and must demonstrate her own transformation: “When

you create along with your students, you actually create a circle of creative energy and it makes every person to make that happen- including you” (p.24).

To tell and write one’s story is to make identity visible, to pin down who we are in a given moment and to track the development of our identity. It is a praxis of power (Freire, p. 164). I believed that my students would be empowered by the process.

Why Hip Hop?

Fascinated by my students’ engagement at the hip hop performance, I believed that hip hop would be a part of their contemporary culture: after all, they knew all the words to the songs. I imagined that I could hook my project onto something that they spent hours out of school listening to: hip hop. One thing that I did not consider was how the students would react to creating their own form of the artistic expression that filled their out of school hours. Naively, I believed that the investigation of traditional First Nations stories and contemporary hip hop would be a great opportunity to discover with my students in a true ‘Freirean’ dialogue: “Teachers and students co-intent on reality, are both Subjects, not only in the task of unveiling that reality, and thereby coming to know it critically, but in the task of re-creating that knowledge. As they attain this knowledge of reality through common reflection and action, they discover themselves as permanent re-creators” (Freire, 1998, p. 69).

Chapter Two: Literature Review

Prologue

I was assigned my current teaching position in November. The original teacher had terminated his contract and given the kids no notice that he was leaving. I visited the school on a Thursday morning. The power went out and everyone was sent home. I spoke briefly with the teacher. He told me that none of these kids would go to post-secondary. He left me a three line description of each student and packed everything else up.

The students were surprised to find me, a ‘blond dragon lady,’ as one teacher explained about the students’ perception when everyone returned to school the next week. Weathering the grief and outrage of the students, I grasped on to any classroom activities that would engage and entertain the class. That first day, I learned as much as I could about them and also told them stories about my past. After all, a clown does not come out onto the stage without something to share and to tell. The students responded with some interest.

On the second day, anxious to make more connections and mindful that classroom management might be better with familiar faces in the room, I invited the school Elders to tell stories to the group. I told them that stories live in the people we know and love (Wagamese, 2012, p.38). I introduced the activity and in the storytelling method taught by Richard Wagamese, I encouraged the students to listen out to the edges of the story and remembering sequence and detail. “Pull the story into you...Lean in and listen to their words. Use your body to let the story inhabit you. Show them by the way that you pay attention to their words that their stories are valuable” (p. 39). The kids were enraptured. When each story was completed, we pretended that we were the “I,” the

teller of the story, and we told the story again as though it were ours. I explained that the story was a gift and we would always tell who we had received it from. As a group, we put it into writing, first on the board and then wrote the finished copy in our notebooks. The students were involved and engaged. I was relieved. I had found something that they would participate in.

Function of Story

First, we must ask, “What is a story?” Briefly, story is the retelling of a sequence of real or imaginary events but more than that, story is “a vehicle that carries us on an engaging, dramatic journey to a destination of resolution we find satisfying and fulfilling” (Johnston, n.d.). Story fulfills a deeper purpose. Bruner (1991) in *Self Making and World Making* states that narrative necessarily comprises two features. One of them is telling what happened to a cast of human beings with a view to the order in which things happened (p.71). Yet story is more than the bland recounting of the order of events. Bruner notes another level of complexity: the details and sequence of events are subject to selection by the teller’s belief of truth (p.71). Recognizing that the teller chooses some details and ignores others to include in the story adds a further layer of complexity and also locates the story with a particular person, and within a particular group, culture or society and in their unique belief of truth (p.71). Indeed, each tale is told by an individual with, as Wagamese explains, their own “unique frame of reference” (Wagamese, personal communication).

Storytelling is also highly personal. Wersch, as cited in Atleo, reminds us: “The word in language is half someone else’s. It becomes ‘one’s own’ only when the speaker populates it with his own intention, his own accent . . . adapting it to his own semantic and

expressive intention” (Wersch, as cited in Atleo, 2009, p. 455). In many ways, the storyteller functions as a part of the story, embedded in it, for their voice and presence shape the story. Those who are listening also shape the story as their presence, attention, interest affects the story and of course, each listener will remember the story in their own way to retell it again. (McGloughlin, 2009, n.p.). The three elements: story, teller and listener must be present for the story to have effect, or exist at all. This idea is also congruent with clowning in that a clown adapts the scene to the audience and needs the audience present to exist at all.

McGloughlin continues to explain how story functions by describing a story about an anthropologist who leaves a television in a village in Africa. For some time, the villagers gather around the talking box and listen with great interest, but when the anthropologist returns some months later he discovers the gift dust covered and idle. He queries the villagers as to why they haven’t been watching it and one woman replies, “Your box knows many stories, in fact many more than our storyteller, but the difference is, our storyteller knows us” (McGloughlin, 2009, n.p.). Not only does the village story teller know the most relevant and familiar stories for her audience, the teller knows what to tell, when and how to tell it. Furthermore, in story telling interactions, the teller is a mirror and reflects back to their audience who they, the members of audience, are and who they are becoming.

On another level, when a group gathers to share a story, they also share the experience of the story, recognize and appreciate that which they collectively are. “To say that the storyteller knows her audience refers to more than knowledge, an accumulation of facts about who they are. It is certainly this, but it is also the present-

time knowing that occurs in the act of telling the story” (McLoughlin, 2009, n.p.) This responsiveness is demonstrated in clown as well.

Through the medium of speech and gesture, storytellers transfer ideas and images in the form of a narrative and this occurs at a unique moment in time. Even if the story is repeated to the same listeners at a different time, the story and the telling will be different, as both parties will have changed. (McGloughlin, 2009, n.p.) Using intuition and a responsive caring, the teller and clown connect with their audience and adjust their story to the audience’s present needs. This attunement, adding more humor, insight, action, or inspiration, for example, is a close attention. The audiences reciprocates this attention with their willingness to listen. This interaction or shared experience creates a deeper sense of community and connection (Mcloughlin, 2009, n.p.).

Clearly, stories are not simply an indication of proficiency in reading, writing, and language. Stories function on deeper levels and contribute to a broader conceptualization of literacy as proficiency in social relationships and social practices (Gee as cited in Haig Brown, 2010, p. 929), which provide a sort of ‘identity kit.’ “Stories give us ways of being in the world. (They are) forms of life that integrate words, acts, values, beliefs, attitudes, (and) social identities” (Haig Brown, 2010, p. 934).

Why Choose Storytelling?

Storytelling is common across all cultures and is a valuable form of human expression. “All we are is story,” says writer Thomas King (2003, p.7) and this is echoed by Richard Wagamese in his writer’s handbook, *Writing with the old ones*: “We are surrounded by story” (Wagamese, 2012, 26). He cites the example of co-workers returning to work on a Monday morning when one asks another, “What did you do on the

weekend?” Wagamese explains, “What we don’t hear is the message that rides underneath the words we are so familiar with. Those words are: “Tell me a story” (Wagamese, 2012, p.32). Indeed, the question about how one spent the weekend is a question begging for a story.

Stories are universal. To explain this, we can look to the work of Vladimir Propp who developed a system to account for all of the possible permutations of plots. Propp's morphology is the exemplar of structural analysis. As explained in the preface to the translation of his book, *Morphology of the Folktale* (1928), in this type of structural analysis, the structure or formal organization of a folkloristic text is described following the chronological order of the linear sequence of elements in the text as reported from an informant. Thus, if a tale consists of elements A to Z, the structure of the tale is delineated in terms of this same sequence (Propp, p.5). Propp identified common plot actions within Grimm’s folk tales and then broke the stories down into morphemes (analyzable chunks). These 31 identified *narratemes* (narrative units) which he found in those folk tales, comprise the structure of the vast majority of all existing stories. For example, function seven is described as “victim(s) / protagonist(s) accept deception and unwittingly help antagonist(s)” (Propp. 1928, p.7). This narrateme is familiar in folk tales and some First Nations stories. One must only think of *Hansel and Gretel* who unwittingly help their stepmother by dropping crumbs when they are led away from their home. Similarly, in the story, *Raven Steals the Light*, the Old Man allows Raven to play with all the boxes in the house and in doing so, ‘allows’ Raven to steal light concealed inside.(Reid & Bringhurst, 1996, p. 15). Although Propp's syntagmatic approach dealt with the structure of text alone, many literary folklorists have considered it to be an error

to study the text in isolation from its social and cultural context (Dundes as cited in Propp, 1928, p.7). Of note is that the narratemes comprise the structure of story which is universal, even when the details of the narrateme relate to the culture in which they are found.

Although my work will not be to relate the paradigms found in First Nations stories and myth to the world at large, I want to point out that the formula for story is a structure that in some way satisfies us. Stories are altered or modified. Stories were not meant to be unchanging or so petrified that they do not lend themselves to use by different generations, life experiences, and ultimately by readers (Atleo, 2009, p. 453). Story is an enduring form. Atleo, discussing the use of story by the Nu-chal-nath peoples, explains the healing power of stories, “The stories were ways to help people find balance within themselves, their community, and the natural world” (Atleo, 2009, p.453).

Both clowning and storytelling are timeless and personal. Storytelling provides us with the essential context and other important environmental or sociological conditions which are often lost in the stark and emotionless world of the written word (Marsh, 2012, p.57). Clowning and play also offer a connection and a shared experience that ameliorates our isolation.

As long as we continue to share this planet, we will be surrounded by stories. We must just ask something as bland as, “How was your weekend?” to initiate the process. We just must just invite the play to begin with a look, a comment or ridiculous question.

Why Include Indigenous Storytelling in the Curriculum?

One reason that I want to include storytelling is one of social justice. As succinctly stated by Haig-Brown, “In the late nineteenth century and well into the

twentieth, one of the primary goals of the residential schools was to stifle Indigenous thought instituted through severe punishments for speaking a Native language or practising what was designated the devil's work, Native spirituality" (2010, p.945). Quite simply, stories were removed from First Nations peoples' memories. Residential schools almost successfully accomplished this. I imagine that the rich history of storytelling was diminished with the loss of the language. As the language is largely unknown to many contemporary First Nations students, so are the stories. As Foucault writes, "in order to gain mastery over a group and their thoughts, it is necessary first to subjugate it at the level of language, control its free circulation in speech, expunge from it the things that were said, and extinguish the words that rendered it too visibly present" (as cited in Haig Brown, 2010, p.20). Indeed, "the very life ways and thinking of peoples have been delegitimized, and community control usurped through colonization" (Haig Brown, 2010, p.453).

The Non-Aboriginal Teacher

I recognize that as a non-Aboriginal teacher, I must learn from my students: their particular vision of success, their frame of reference. I imagine that by using story in the classroom, we will be transformed, possibly me, more than the students. My hope is to help students to claim, celebrate, and remember their Aboriginal identity and knowledge through listening to, telling and rewriting First Nations stories in our classroom but how can I, their non-Aboriginal teacher, connect across this chasm of perceived difference?

I cannot be who I am not. "When non-Aboriginal teachers teach Aboriginal culture, what they are teaching is not Aboriginal culture but Aboriginal culture from their perspective. The two aren't the same. The situation is made even more complicated by

the existence of multiple perspectives within Aboriginal culture...Moreover, this condition of multiple perspectives exists not just with Aboriginal culture, whatever that now is, but within individual people of Aboriginal descent, too” (Oberg, p. 128).

I imagine that when my students see me, they see that I am part of the white culture and may have preconceived ideas about who I may be and indeed, despite cultivating open mindedness, I too may fall into this trap of not seeing the multiplicity in students. Annette Oberg reminds us, “We are all members of several cultures and our knowing unfolds and is enfolded in the dynamic of living” (Oberg et al., 2007, p.117). She exhorts, “We must learn to live in the midst of the convergence of multiple cultures, and to be comfortable in the moment of unfolding, face to face with Aboriginal and other students in their classrooms” (p.131).

Simply acknowledging this multiplicity is a change in perspective. The teacher does not consider that her point of view is the accepted norm in the class room. Indeed, Oberg states, “Getting to a place of welcoming tension in the converging cultures present in our classrooms requires a change in mindset and emotional set. It requires changing our way of being in the world. Instead of merely tolerating difference, we become willing to live in the tension of difference and eventually come to see this tension not as unavoidable, but as generative (p.134).

Oberg defines the intensified situation: “with Aboriginal students, the situation is compounded by history. Historically, the dominant Eurocentric culture—my culture—has not just devalued and excluded, but systematically eradicated Aboriginal cultural knowledge and ways of being, leaving Aboriginal people without access to the cultural capital necessary for success in Western societal institutions. Ironically, although power

resides in the position of the teacher, as teacher, I'm powerless to undo my implication in this historical process . . . and so I face Aboriginal students unable to presume that I know anything about their cultural truths or identities (p.123).

I am embedded in a conceptual understanding of Western culture. My way of being, or contemporary ontology, is my own blind spot. In an effort to understand Indigenous knowledge and way of being, I draw on Haig Brown's explication of the writing of Maori scholar, Makere Stewart-Harawira (2010). Although Haig Brown and Makere Stewart-Harawira acknowledge that we must resist any essentialized, fixed notion, they note that global Indigenous ontology includes beliefs that interrelationships between and among all things are fundamental to sense-making; that knowledge is sacred; that it cannot be found in a 'codified canon,' but in life itself; and that it is holistic in that it always already acknowledges four dimensions—the physical, mental, emotional and spiritual (Stewart-Harawira as cited in Haig-Brown, 2010, p.935). It is a challenge as a non-Aboriginal educator to shift one's thinking to recognize, and include in one's teaching, these broadly shared beliefs about the meaning of meaning and the nature of interrelationships (Haig Brown, 2010, p. 935). This refusal to divide and compartmentalize in any reductionist way is accompanied by an adherence to recognizing all things exist in relation to one another (p.926). Haig Brown recounts how one day, in a science lab, Pat Wilson of Haisla Nation said, "My people believe even the rocks have souls" (Haig Brown, 2010, p. 454). Could a non-Aboriginal teacher embrace these different perspectives?

I cite the following examples to demonstrate different perceptions. First, in Western culture, a name may demonstrate parents' values and wishes for a child. Our

birth name rarely changes. In some traditional Indigenous cultures though, a person may be given another name relating to their forefathers. These ancestor names that are given during rites of passage were identified as landmarks in the narrative context of knowledge production. Ancestor names are cultural scripts for lineage members that form part of the social rights and obligations of its members. For example, holding a name is understood as an embodiment of the culturally valued characteristics or attributes that the name represents (Atleo, 2009, p.458). This could be understood as a motivational practice to ensure a person ‘lived up to their name’ by showing a consonance between word and deed but it also offers another aspect: ancestor names provide the developing person with a non-prescriptive cultural narrative and script in which to grow and mature (p.462).

A second example is that of pace and the function of silence in the classroom. Although dominant culture may be uncomfortable in the presence of silence, Annette Oberg advises that in order to “establish a nonjudgmental atmosphere and encourage everyone to give each other benefit of the doubt. I have this transparency called Miller’s Law that says, “In order to understand what another person is saying, you must assume that it is true and try to imagine what it could be true of” (as cited in Elgin, 1990, p. 7). She continues, “I have another overhead transparency about allowing silence so that people who need some time to think before they speak aren’t always crowded out by the talkative ones. It says, “Silence is our listening openness” (as cited in Levin, 1989, p. 232). I show these transparencies...to remind people that conversation and listening, rather than debate and argumentation, are the discourse norms in my classes. (Oberg et al., 2007, p.123).

A further example could be seen in the First Nations stories of the trickster. Carter (2011) in *Troubling Tricksters: Revisioning Critical Conversations* explains, “Native artists repeatedly voice understanding that to access the trickster within ourselves is to discover who we are; to experience transformation, to exercise transformation, to know why we exist, and to exist fully as human creatures” (p. 265). The trickster is recognized in First Nations mythology as a powerful transforming agent. Carter goes on to state, “Our storytellers repeatedly testify to the power of that dormant entity that, once accessed, becomes the catalyst that truly heals by converting mere survival into life fully realized” (p.266). This idea is further exemplified by Ryan as he writes, “[T]he “Trickster Shift” is perhaps best understood as serious play, the ultimate goal of which is a radical shift in viewer perspective and even political positioning by imagining and imaging alternative viewpoints. This is no idle intention” (Ryan, 1999, p.5). Both naming and roles in First Nations cultures may have a different significance than the ones Western culture may assign them.

In addition, many Indigenous people in Canada “are within one or two generations of having a First Nation language as their first language and their primary discourse...(and that) primary discourse structures persist even in second and third generations of people who have moved from a First Nation language to English”(Haig Brown, 2010, p.926). Just as certain pronunciations and grammatical forms persist, Haig Brown extrapolates that some “speakers new to English... resist full acquisition of standard English... as a primary discourse and instead learn it in a way that pays homage to older language patterns and usages. They co-create and develop fluency in this intermediary (new) discourse” (p. 927). This may be tied up with an (unconscious

perhaps) allegiance to the foundational language, discourse, epistemology, and worldview. As a non-Aboriginal teacher, I must consider this ontological shift in thinking and be open to new realizations.

This has led me to think more about my students and to consider what learning is happening and how. I must work to consider the conceptual complexity of the culture and meaning making which I have been oblivious to. I would like to be sensitive to the nuances of this, to their ideas of success and mastery. I teach at a First Nations school on First Nations territory. This should mean that Indigenous ways of knowing are recognized and celebrated. I concur with Alteo (2009) that orientations to learning in Indigenous cultures have not been systematically recognized in the co-construction of education for Aboriginal people. Instead, Canadian education begins where Aboriginal people are not: from a Euro-institutional perspective of pedagogy in the context of formal Western schooling (Atleo, 2009, p.453).

Possibility in the Classroom

I imagine that sharing stories will help us to develop a classroom culture to add to the multiplicity of who we are. Indeed, “what we know, who we are, and how we live are co-emergent phenomena and are, thus, inseparable...How we perceive the world all depends on the distinctions we make as a culture. (Oberg et al., 2007, p.117). Stories will draw us closer as a community and help me to understand my students in a deeper way. I concur with M. Atleo as she writes about understanding aboriginal learning ideology through story work with Nu-chal-nath elders. This question is pertinent to ask, “How can First Nations cultural learning archetypes be acknowledged in the classroom?” (Alteo, 2009, p. 464). How can I hear and understand the culture better?

Why Storytelling with My Students in Particular?

“I’ve put out a lot of little roots these two years,” Anne told the moon, “and when I’m pulled up, they’re going to hurt a great deal” (Montgomery, p.230).

In this following section I invite the reader to expand the edges of their perspective and consider a particular group of transient students within the emotional context of place. Like many teachers, I am teaching “mixed up hybrid kids” (Aoki, 2005, p.242): to explain, my class comprises young teens who live with constant change and unknowing. This characteristic could be shared by new immigrant youth or any other minority groups. I feel that I share this characteristic. If I had a clan, it would be a bird in the wind because as a family, we have pulled up roots so many times, often with a good deal of hurt.

Each student is part of several group cultures: their family, their school, and the local community, as well as being a “teenager” living within a social peer group. Constant moves can mean that youth must straddle two cultures, possibly that of a birth family and a foster home or two separated parents. Through this maze of traditions and expectations of roles, a student must struggle to develop an understanding of their personal identity. An appropriate metaphor of this is given by Bhabha: “the individual who migrates is translated into a new place and operates through a new language, becoming a translated individual bearing traces of both locations and languages” (as cited in Johnston & Richardson, 2012, p. 119). Students bear traces of many locations and different ways of speaking.

Unfortunately in classrooms, teachers may not know the extent to which transience has affected students. “The migrant culture of the ‘in-between’, the minority

position, dramatizes the activity of culture's appropriation beyond the assimilationist's dream, or the racist's nightmare...and towards an encounter with the ambivalent process of splitting and hybridity that marks the identification with culture's difference." (Bhabha as cited in Johnston & Richardson, 2012, p. 121). Indeed, I feel that students are sometimes lost, straddling two (or more) cultures and not feeling a sense of belonging in either.

The article, *Researching children's place and space* (2003) by Ellis, states that place provides three types of things: "security, social affiliation, and creative expression and exploration" (p.3). Continued moves to new places can cut one's sense of security, social affiliation and the courage to express and explore. If children "cannot manage to assemble a full identity of their multiple cultural identities, recognize a place to call home and attach their roots to, they may consequently suffer from a lack of essential feelings and instead experience a feeling of grief and a sense of not belonging anywhere" (Lambie & Limberg as cited in Engelbrecht, 2013, p. 36).

"Constantly changing can be very vulnerable and in consequence, it can be difficult to care about or need anyone" (Pollock & Van Reken, 2009, p.138). From their disengagement and their fear to take academic risks, I believe that some of my students often feel 'rootless' and vulnerable as a result of their constant moves. This inhibits them from acting and becoming responsible citizens. I imagine that if students were to form attachments to the place that they are currently in, they could bridge the gap between where they were and where they are. To embody the place they are in, in an emotional context, is to embody themselves.

Place attachments are emotional bonds that form between people and their physical surroundings. “In a geographical sense, a person may feel attached to restricted or vast places of very different characteristics, but place attachment arises, among other variables, from mobility, length of residence, shared meanings and social belonging” (Hernandez et al., 2007, p. 310). Clearly, a place attachment is not restricted to the physical environment. In Bowers’ chapter about developing the cultural commons, he suggests that bringing “the students into face to face relationships with the different mentors and other people engaged in cultural commons activities” (1878, p. 402), is key to developing the students’ sense of their place in the community and in the world. He continues, “This involves going into the community, as well as bringing people into the classroom, with the purpose of enabling students to hear personal stories of how interests and talents were discovered, how they were dependent upon intergenerational knowledge shared by mentors, how their activities give them a sense of community”(p. 402).

Engaging with the community through hearing the stories from local tellers is another aspect of education in which even itinerant students may develop connections. “What students are learning is that narratives are part of the cultural memory, that they represent earlier ways of thinking and that they played an important role in the education of the young before the time of literacy, and that they are the source of experience that are often used as metaphors for understanding today’s world” (p. 408). Students can then contribute their own narratives and in essence, place their hybrid experience into the greater story. They can become part of an important dialogue.

Dialogue revives memory and builds community in a recursive fashion and in that, transformation occurs. The act of dialogue is to remake our reality with our words

and stories, moving from what I have heard to what I know. In this, we negotiate a new identity and that in itself is learning. Stories then, both the telling and the listening can work together to help students establish bonds as “place attachment as a multidimensional construct that incorporates factors such as identity, dependence on place and social bonds” (Kyle, Graefe, & Manning, 2005, p. 162).

When students are moved to another home or between homes, they are not only losing the stability of their lives, references for past action and the locus of memories and meaning, they lose a part of who they are. Transitions into new natural, social and cultural environments have profound significance. “A ‘cultural translation’ takes place, comparable to a translated text that reveals the traces of both the original language source and the translated language” (Bhabha as cited in Johnston & Richardson, 2012, p.115). Our connections in the physical and emotional context are powerful aspects of human life that inform our sense of identity, create meaning in our lives, facilitate community and influence action. A teacher must seek to understand her students and see the “otherness of others that is not blurred” (Aoki, 2005, p.239) to connect authentically with her students. The sharing of stories can offer us “understandings of hybridity (that) may serve us well as teachers, faced with the challenges and opportunities afforded by classrooms of students whose lives and minority positions are similarly defined by this migrant culture of the ‘in-between.’”(Bhabha as cited in Johnson & Richardson, 2012, p.121). Learning happens in the context of relationships and especially for transient students, the teacher is the bridge maker and the bridge.

Story could be the vehicle. Story work is vital to create community, a sense of self and a sense of belonging. It can even be said that “belongingness is a precondition for

academic achievement “(Ellis, 2003, p.17). Indeed, “story work can be a vital process of mutual decolonization of Indigenous and non-Aboriginal professionals in education, counseling, life career development, healing, and social work” (Alteo, 2009, p.463).

Why Hip Hop in the Classroom?

You can't stop the hip hop (Marsh, 2009, p.110).

Hip hop is a culture that evolved through the trade route of West Africa and is increasingly recognized as “ a pure artistic response to oppression—protest music where art truly imitates life, its music intended to play back society’s most celebratory and inflammatory aspects” (Higgins, 2009, p.12). Educators are realizing that despite the fact that its inclusion challenges the current western canon of legitimate texts for study in schools, hip hop is a way to engage marginalized students in the education process. Indeed, it has been realized that “for students to truly engage in learning, they must be able to see a space for themselves within it” (Kelly, 2013, p. 52). Studies conducted show that “exposure to popular culture in the classroom allowed students to become more actively engaged in learning a new concept due to a vast amount of prior knowledge in the delivery system” (Eckhoff & Guberman, 2006, p.). Further studies have shown that some “educators are realizing that students who are able to access a hip hop text are more engaged because the lesson is connected to their outside life” (Alim & McCry as cited in Kelly, 2013, p. 55).

Despite all this evidence, most educators sideline hip hop and question its validity as a meaningful art form which should be included in the curriculum. In a recently published video about hip hop in the classroom, teacher, Mr. William Anderson explains,

“The education system is built around creating worth in white European history and totally neglects, other than a few cameo figures, the contributions that people of color have made, not only to this country but to the continents of North America, South America and the world” (I rule my destiny films, n. d., n.p.) Clearly, groups with the most power “often construct, perhaps unconsciously, knowledge that maintains their power and protects their interests” (Banks as cited in Greenfield, 2007, p. 234), yet the omission of the culture and music of our youth carries another more sinister message. “With hip hop being such an important part of minority youth culture, this non-inclusion inside the classroom may send another message that indirectly, their voices, culture, traditions, hold no value” (Kelly 2013, p. 53).

Culturally relevant teaching is a now common concept that teachers may work to enact in their classrooms but we, as educators, must challenge our own preconceptions about a ‘good school education’. I believe that culturally relevant teaching can only be successful when teachers can position themselves in cultural place of the students. In another recent video interview regarding the role of hip hop in education, Dr. Pedro Noguera, NYU Professor, simply stated, “We expect kids to learn the way we teach but the way kids learn in school should be the way they learn outside of school” (Noguera, n.d., web). This statement is an ontological shift making it clear that hip hop, so popular with disengaged youth, should be included in the curriculum in a meaningful way. We need to remix education and offer that which values our youth’s knowledge and interests.

Others have realized this. “Traditional schools have failed to critically incorporate the ethnic/cultural identities of minority students within school dialogues and curricula in empowering ways, it is no surprise that most of these students when becoming conscious

that these schools are not there to serve their interests, instantly disengage themselves” (Greenfield, 2007, p. 237). To address this disjunction, many projects which include hip hop and literacy goals have begun throughout the world. The name of many of these groups expresses the felt need to rethink the education system. For example, "H.E.L.P., or the Hip Hop Educational Literacy Program, offers cutting edge supplemental reading workbooks developed around the lyrics of popular hip hop songs in order to provide culturally responsive teaching materials that motivate students to read and improve literacy skills" (website, n.d.) In addition, the Hip Hop Re:Education Project, a New York City-based community-arts organization committed to critical pedagogy, uses hip hop culture to inspire and transform communities, engage marginalized and disaffected youth and improve youth motivation and achievement (website, n.d.). There are numerous other examples. Some educators have acknowledged that it may be necessary “to establish a separate course that focuses on hip hop text as the central literary genre and recognizes their power as creative, valuable, instructional and cultural texts worthy of academic study” (Kelly, 2013, p.52).

Why Hip Hop in My Classroom?

Growing up in this world can be a traumatic experience and quite simply, youth need a place to explore and express their identity. Hip hop music “tells personal stories that inform or connect to the reader/ listener” (Kelly, 2013, p.54) so hip hop offers youth an opportunity to voice their fears and dreams. They can convey past and contemporary experience. Students can document their lives in an honest and open fashion and in doing so, students can offer support to those who have endured similar circumstances. In addition, hip hop is accessible in that there are many roles a person can take in the

production of the art form: poet, rapper, dancer, graffiti artist, DJ, beat boxer, graphic and fashion designer (Tedxtalks, 2012, n.p.). Further, a certain level of proficiency and competence in hip hop can be achieved in a short time with few resources.

Hip hop is a connective form for young people all over the world (Tedxtalks, 2012 n.p.). Youth in Nunavut have combined throat singing with beat boxing to create a hybrid rhythm for their style of rap. Hip hop is an appropriate vehicle for them to explain the complex interplay of powers involved in colonialism and their present situation. In fact, an indigenous Hip Hop group of “Northerners with Attitude,” (NWA) produced a video of their hip hop song, *Don't call me Eskimo*, in 2001 to much acclaim and press. The song talks of the Inuit's' own struggles, the stereo types ascribed to them and other marginalized groups and also conveys past and contemporary realities (Marsh, 2009, p. 110).

Hip hop is a tool to eradicate dysconscious racism, that is “the uncritical habit of the mind that justifies inequity and exploitation by accepting the existing order of things as given” (King as cited in Greenfield (2007, pg. 234). Youth in Palestine have created and shared rap songs about their lived experience (TedXtalks, 2012, n.p.) in a documentary called “Slingshot Hip Hop. “Hip hop is a language and culture of liberation that was and continues to be a strategy for resistance,” explains Marsh (Tedxtalks, 2012, n.p.) The documentary “braids together the stories of young Palestinians living in Israel, Gaza, and the West Bank as they discover hip hop and employ it as a tool to surmount divisions imposed by occupation and poverty. From internal checkpoints and Separation Walls to gender norms and generational differences, this is the story of young people

crossing the borders that separate them” (Fresh booza, n.d., n.p.). A young man interviewed in the film says the hip hop project is “like a flame in the darkness of a cave” (Fresh booza, n.d., n.p.). Here, the rappers offer a counter narrative to the dominant culture.

Given these two examples, one can challenge the mainstream view of hip hop as focusing on ‘bling and bootie.’ In mainstream culture, the stereo type of hip hop is gang culture and crime. Critics of hip hop have raised concerns that hip hop contains violence, misogyny and immorality. In the seminal book about hip hop, *Prophets of the Hood: Politics and Poetics in Hip Hop*, Imani Perry (2004) acknowledges the conflicting values extant in hip hop culture. He states, “To listen to hip hop is to enter a world of complexity and contradiction” (p. 1). Indeed this is true. Although these negative aspects are apparent, hip hop has a history of reclamation, resistance and revolution. It recognizes the shared collective experience of marginalization, persecution, rebellion and celebration (Marsh, 2009, p.111).

Do the positive aspects of hip hop outweigh the negative? One must only think of the unsavory aspects of great literature to see how we overlook those flaws. For example, each of Shakespeare’s plays include immoral acts, whether misogyny, racism, bribery, thievery or slander. “Great literature is not defined by the presence of violence or sexuality or the lack thereof, but by how great writers have the ability to make us think deeply about the dilemmas of the human experience” (Greenfield, 2007, p. 70). I think of my students and their silence and disengagement. It is believed that this non-action “can often appear to be self-imposed in the secondary classroom, but it is a direct result of the marginalization of the culture and language of these students” (Lim as cited in Kelly,

2013 p. 102). I imagine that I am doing a great disservice to “students by avoiding the inclusion of pop culture in my curriculum. I now realize that I am failing to afford them both the physical space and the critical apparatus to enter into a thoughtful discussion about the merits and the problems with the music they listen to on a daily basis” (Greenfield, 2007, p.89).

What is Risked and What Can be Gained?

Most interesting is the dialogue, growth and understanding that can emerge from this process. Although I may ruffle the feathers of administration by breaking the canon and studying pop culture, I have an opportunity to really practice a Freirean type of social consciousness that will challenge my ideological framework, in particular that of the teacher harbouring the most knowledge. “To successfully teach popular culture, necessity mandates that one be open to recognizing one’s limitations and to being taught by students” (Greenfield, 2007, p. 240). On this journey my students and I will co-create knowledge as my students have more lived experience of the culture of hip hop than I do. This will also lead me to question my own cultural frame of reference and to examine my students’ perspectives with more care. As Buckingham (1998) suggests, teaching popular culture subverts dominant paradigms by positioning students as emerging ‘experts’. Successful educators must be ready to learn from and with their students (Buckingham as cited in Greenfield, 2007, p. 234). My research questions have been “Who do students see when they look at me, their teacher?” “How can I, their non-Aboriginal teacher connect across this chasm of perceived difference?” “How can I build rapport?” “How can I make deep learning happen?” “How can I increase their sense of safety to enable

them to learn?” “How can I be a positive agent in our mutual decolonization?”

Can the exploration of storytelling and hip hop help me to answer these questions?

Chapter Three: The Project

Prologue

This chapter begins with a description of my attempt to adjust my professional practice to lead Aboriginal students through the steps to successfully use storytelling and hip hop to engage in the curriculum and take joy in learning. As the chapter continues I share some of the successes and challenges I experienced. Through narrative inquiry and writing, these experiences were processed, analysed, evaluated and synthesized, leading to a better understanding of how to teach in a First Nations middle school. The names, characters and incidents shared here are characterizations of typical events and interactions that may have occurred. Any resemblance to actual events or persons is entirely coincidental. This chapter can be considered an illustrative non-fiction to support the sharing of my reflections.

Changing the Stance

Upon rereading the first chapter and literature review, it is clear that all the reading, critiquing and synthesizing of ideas from academics, still left me grappling for a clear direction. What form could a project take? My desire to investigate so many areas was well-intended. I had tried to latch on to a tangible vehicle through which the transformation of my students would be made evident. Writing of any type, especially poetry, has always helped me to organize thoughts and work through personal issues. I wanted students to enjoy working with words- and to be empowered by them. I had seen it when I taught other students from different groups before: the joy that comes when one has crafted a piece of writing to achieve its purpose and thought this joy would be replicated once again. Indeed, Paolo Freire (1993) stated, “To tell and write one’s story is

to make identity visible, to pin down who we are in a given moment and to track the development of our identity. It is a praxis of power” (p. 164).

The hope was that the students would enjoy sharing their stories by writing hip-hop lyrics and that through this process, they would be seen and heard. The expectation that students would develop self-confidence, would love this practice of power and would be more eager to learn, was incorrect. The motivation to work did not come from the scripted curriculum. The focus on these tangible methods as ways to connect across perceived chasms of difference was an error. I have learned that the vehicle for empowerment and healing is not as important as the bridge it drives on: what we do was not as important as who we are to each other;

Situating My Project

To help me process and communicate my practice, I have generated a series of three fictional students or composite characters that approximately represent the students a person might meet in my class.

‘Alex’, may have attended over 7 schools and because of learning delays, would have required extra help and intervention in each school s/he had previously attended. Progress might have been further impacted by poor attendance. Previous school records could have shown numerous suspensions for defiant behaviour. Complex social emotional needs often would mean that the student was moody. On some days, s/he was highly self-critical. This meant her/his moods were angry, sad and self-deprecating. “Shut-downs” and tears were the result. On other days, Alex would be too agitated and giddy to stay seated or to stop producing a constant litany of words and sound effects in the classroom, thereby disturbing other students and challenging the teacher.

‘Berni’, could be working at a grade level several years below our class grade, and might lack confidence to initiate tasks or work independently. Berni might have been required to wear hearing aids or glasses but either did not have them or refused to wear them despite repeated queries from personnel at the school. In addition, Berni’s voice might be almost a whisper when asked to share thoughts in class. Judging from his/er behaviour, s/he may have been marginalized in the regular schools. His/er silence and passivity could be a learned behaviour that allowed, Berni to ‘slip under the wire’ and avoid the shame of not knowing what to do - or what work was required to begin a project.

‘Chris’, another fictional student, may be too shy to participate in class activities. The exposure and the vulnerability that came with that kind of risk could be just too much. His/er distinct desire not to communicate, with either writing or oral story telling might be flummoxing to a teacher. I think of the “praxis of power” (Freire, p.164) and wonder why s/he might not want to exercise this power. What was at the root of this intense guardedness and refusal to take a risk? Shame seems a likely culprit as humiliation may have been a big part of Chris’ school experience: to make a mistake meant ridicule. Could Chris have learned to be invisible in order to avoid risking shame? Records might show Chris had grief issues which caused depression. S/he might self-harm.

I wondered, “Could these ‘typical’ students be the victims of a ‘soft racism’ in the regular school system: could teachers’ low expectations be based on students’ skin colour, culture or home circumstance? Who did they see when they looked at me, their new teacher?” I hoped I could make a difference for the students. Coming from a

background of work with adults and ESL students, I had to make considerable adjustments.

I decided to scrutinize my own belief system and perspectives to consciously look for ways to honour, dignify, and incorporate the knowledge and experience of all students. For example, dominant culture may judge that by moving from one extended family member to another, a child may experience unnecessary change but another perspective would be that the student receives support and encouragement from a wider spectrum of an extended family.

Still, I was an outsider to my students' culture and community and it was my responsibility to be constantly mindful of what might be going on behind my students' eyes. I had to learn new perspectives and engage with students in an intercultural relationship where they were experts in a culture and tradition that I did not know. I was not there to fix students but to seek to understand them and help them move forward. By challenging assumptions in my own thinking and rethinking the way things are traditionally done, I could embrace the lived experience of my students, value them, and maintain expectations for academic growth.

Road Block

Recognizing that I was working with a vulnerable population, I searched for a way to effectively communicate my project without exposing the group that I was working with. I felt that conjuring a tone of expertise was false for me. I had not become an expert nor did I believe that much resonant knowledge could be transmitted this way. I am a clown and a story teller; I have no reason to come on to the stage without having a story to tell. Then, I reflected on the sage words of Thomas King, "All we are is story"

(2013, p. 1.) Indeed, at the beginning of this project, I had researched story and the importance of it as a teaching tool. When it came to write about my experience, I reflected on my values and decided to follow the storytelling tradition.

What follows is a work of creative non-fiction. In it, I honour the great philosopher, Socrates who used storytelling to transmit knowledge. In the Symposium on Love, we, the readers, share in the story that Plato tells of this symposium. The story within the Symposium on Love that Socrates narrates was told to Socrates by a woman named Diotima. This serves to create three layers between the reader and the knowledge that Plato shares. I too, use a story told to me by another wiser teacher, a fictitious Ms. Diotima, as I am certainly less wise than Socrates and he knew himself to be wise “in neither a great nor a small way” (Plato, p.214).

The following then is a story that Ms. Diotima told me just as she told a story to Socrates. I am taking the role of a mere storyteller. One can even consider that it is the story itself which is talking. One may consider that it is truer than if it had happened at all.

I begin by asking:

Questions to Ms. Diotima

What are the steps to teaching hip hop?

To guide a class of struggling/at-risk learners to write hip hop lyrics is a complex process that won't work if the students are reluctant to learn the numerous steps necessary to develop a sensitivity to language and master rhyme, rhythm and figurative language. The process can be overwhelming but moreover, this process will not work well without the context of a strong relationship with the teacher. Unfortunately, I

learned this only after painfully progressing through a series of lessons leading up to writing hip hop lyrics.

The first step I took to embark on the unit was to define poetry and discuss how it is condensed language. Then the class continued by exploring language and the plasticity of it. Indeed, this sounds easy yet the learning curve was steep.

To clarify, students may not have seen that these steps were necessary to reach the desired end. Could it be that the selected activity, examples and the scaffolding: “I do, we do”, of each exercise were not enough for the fictional student, Berni? Could it be that abstract thought was foreign and uncomfortable for the fictional student Alex? Could it be that student Chris did not have the bravery for it and did not want his/er thoughts set forever on paper? Or had I not forged a strong enough relationships for students to connect to the curriculum? Who did the students see when they looked to me, their teacher?

Still too much like a pit bull to see the warning signs, I embarked on a series of lessons to teach sensitivity to language, figurative language, syllables, end rhyme, half rhyme, rhyming couplets, iambic pentameter, and lyric format to lead up to writing the lyrics to hip hop. This exercise in frustration led to questioning how on the websites I had perused, the writers gave tips like, “Just begin, give the assignment and play the chosen beat for the class to compose their own hip hop song.” How are students supposed to get from A-B? Could it be that students might lack a background in some figurative language and study of poetry to build on? Was the concept of rhyming too difficult to grasp? Would the use of online rhyming dictionaries be enough to help?

Ms. Diotima, can you give me an example?

The following scenario illustrates what happened when students embarked on the first steps to writing hip hop lyrics. First, they had to develop a sensitivity to language. The lesson on acrostic poems began with reading and examining a few examples: guiding the students to identify the key features. After I demonstrated the process of creating one and then creating one as a class, I was somewhat confident that they were ready to write on their own. This pattern of gradual removal of support, where each subsequent step had less and less scaffolding, normally would be intended to prepare the majority to tackle the activity on their own, but when the students were instructed to complete the activity independently, hands of students shot up in the air. “What am I supposed to do?” Chris might ask. Alex would mournfully cry, “I don’t get it.” Berni might just sit quietly while other students would have made the leap and would be working dutifully, showing that they were challenged enough to find the task worthwhile.

Even though I thought that stage was set well and all students would be working on the task, I would be running between students – from Alex, to Berni, to Chris, setting them on task, affirming that, “Yes, you write the letters of your name down the left hand side of the page and then from your brainstormed describing words, you write the describing words that fit with the proper letter.” Before I had reached all of them, Berni would have set his head on his desk, Chris might have decided to reapply make-up, and Alex might have asked to go to the bathroom. I asked myself, “Was it that these students had extreme needs outside of the academic ones and were not ready to work independently? Was this their compensation for not knowing what to do?”

Writing was a chore and often loathsome. The stress of open-ended projects was often too great and assignments of this kind were completed at a snail's pace. There was a reluctance to act for fear of making a mistake and constant confirmation was required to assure that the chosen words were appropriate. Another educator told me that "I won't," usually means, "I can't." Was this because the students could not do the work? This was a struggle to understand.

I realized that the students are struggling to find success. I believed that one reason for this was related to confidence with vocabulary, although there were likely many other reasons. We regrouped and I pulled out a vocabulary sheet containing the most commonly used positive descriptors of people and emotions. We looked through the thesaurus and the dictionary for ideas and reviewed strategies for helping each other. We brainstormed lists of words. Now with easier access to a starting set of words, they resumed creating their first acrostic poem. It was better, but they still laboured over the production of the poem.

Subsequent lessons were similar. Although there was a growing sense of achievement as students began to allow me to post their creations on our poetry wall, the students did not exhibit much enthusiasm. The idea that traditional stories could inspire hip-hop lyrics faded away also.

Ms. Diotima, how did you rethink the project?

I returned to those exact core questions which your earlier writing had been centred around. I asked them again. "Who do students see when they look at me, their teacher? How can I, their non-Aboriginal teacher connect across this chasm of perceived difference? How can I build rapport?" "How can I make deep learning happen?" "How

can I increase their sense of safety to enable them to learn?” “Which tools from traditional Aboriginal cultural ways of knowing and contemporary youth culture can I incorporate in my ELA curriculum to better engage my students?”

The project had to go back to the drawing board.

Ms. Diotima, how did you deal with challenging lives and learning challenges?

Sometimes a teacher is presented with a super-challenging class in which there are so many challenges that the best laid plans almost always need to be rebuilt. I had expected that students would have challenges but was unprepared for how much of an impact their emotional lives would have on their abilities to learn. For example, Alex could meltdown almost every day: one day with sobbing tears, another with an anger fit, and another putting his/er head on the desk to shut down. Berni and Chris might sit quietly through a whole class without lifting a pencil unless they were actively monitored and prompted, and even then only until support was removed.

Now, each class of middle school students has normal dramas of teenage heart-break but some classes may have students that have suffered much more serious trauma. Some students might have witnessed abuse or were abused themselves. Alex may have been removed from his/er family by the Ministry. Berni may have been left to care for a younger sibling for the weekend. Chris may have played video games all weekend with little interaction with family or friends. Students are expected to ‘perform’ at school yet they may be straddling two ways of being: two cultures and “consequently suffer from a lack of essential feelings and instead experience a feeling of grief and a sense of not

belonging anywhere” (Lambie & Limberg as cited in Engelbrecht, 2013, p. 36).

How could a teacher get them to write when they might be so conflicted?

What did you do?

Although the efforts I put forth to connect to these students would have been too much for any adult class I had worked with and would have been overbearing or even domineering for former ESL students, the population that I now worked with needed their teacher to be a stronger bridge to their learning. Indeed, no matter how effective a teacher may be at developing strong and healthy relationships with students, some students need more time to accept and readjust to a new teacher- especially if the teacher arrives unknown and unannounced in the middle of a semester. I had focused too much on the spoken curriculum.

I had, in my haste to become a stellar teacher, rushed into the “meat and potatoes” of language and literacy learning. I thought of how “students’ silence, disengagement and...their non-action, [is] not self-imposed but a direct result of their perceived marginalization from the culture and language” (Lim as cited in Kelly, 2013 p. 102). I was their second teacher in a year. Could it be that students needed their teacher to persist and demonstrate that they were a caring adult who was going to stay? How does a teacher reach across this chasm of perceived difference? My attention again turned to building relationships: relationship must come first. This was the focus as we took a break from the unit which was supposed to lead us to writing hip hop songs.

How did you develop deep relationships?

The first tactic was to simplify any responsibilities that did not involve students directly. I searched for acceptable resources instead of creating curriculum that was perfect. I needed all of my energy to focus on the children.

Next, I made sure that I could ‘book-end’ the day. Usually, students arrived by bus in the morning, ate their breakfast and waited for class to begin while teachers scurried about in last minute preparations. Instead of scurrying, I decided that I would act as a host and spend those precious moments welcoming all students to school. When the buses arrived, I was there to greet each student and could make connections in those few sleepy minutes. An old stereo was moved to the central area and we played music each morning. After school each day, while monitoring the line up, I worked to connect with each child, to make small talk and to say good-bye to each student by name, even staying to wave while the bus pulled away.

Over time, this ritual became familiar to the students. They brought things from home to show, even their prohibited cell phones would be brought out to share a photo or song. Students shared their stories. I asked questions and learned of weekend plans and weekend upsets. I shared in their hopes and their disappointments. I knew a positive relationship had developed when they waved back as the bus pulled away. “Make good choices,” I would call.

From an assortment of odd items acquired from garage sales and thrift shops, I would let them choose a gift for their own birthday and when there was a parent visitation, the birth of a sibling or other occasion, they could choose again. In addition, I brought in clothing when I noticed students’ own clothing was ripped beyond repair or

they didn't have shoes to play in the gym. This was done quietly, away from the other students to save face. Students responded positively.

During other breaks and non-instructional times, I made extra efforts to connect with each of the students, letting them know and feel that there was an adult who was interested in them and their lives. In addition, I began finding ways that I could participate in games and play with the students. I wanted to introduce playground activities from my childhood and connect with those who did not have strong athletic abilities so I filled a cart with hula hoops, stilts, sidewalk chalk, Frisbees, a skateboard etc. and regularly took this 'fun' basket out. I resolved to give students the attention that they craved so every call of 'look at me' was responded to enthusiastically. These calls were a way of attaching to me as a safe and caring adult. I spent a lot of time enjoying and connecting with kids. This time was crucial: it was important for them to see that their teacher wanted to be with them even when she did not have to be.

How did you change your pace?

In class, I slowed down. Instead of focussing on my students performing better, now the focus was on them being better off. The students needed to be reassured over and over that I cared about them. I made a point to look each of them in the eye and to say their name as we started the day but words were not enough. A teacher can assure students that things will be okay just by considering her body language and facial gestures. I made a point to communicate a loose relaxed body and a smiling face to convey a caring message, even when it was accompanied by strong words.

Did you have to 'tighten the reins?'

Having come from a teaching background where classroom rules were simple and secondary to my teaching, my previous management style may have been too loose for students to feel safe. They needed consistent rules and expectations. I quickly made changes in seating, developed an improved set of class rules with the students, and had them model positive behaviour. The consequence for mean words and unkind acts was that students would have to stay with me at break and talk about the issue. These meetings were a time for me to be compassionately curious and to get to know the miscreant better.

In addition, the bar for expectations was raised. Universal minimum work expectations were set up, and those who did not meet them stayed in with me at break to receive the necessary help to complete assignments. Misbehaviour or under performance meant more one on one time with me and I worked hard to ensure that the time was a positive experience for the student.

How did clowning feature in the classroom?

I also spent more time in class playing with the students. Although the red nose of clowning was not worn, I often played the fool, savouring mistakes that were made and playing with them. One example was a dropped paper that a student was reluctant to pick up. Instead of a power struggle, I smiled at the student in his vague attempts to pick it up and then tried myself, in an exaggerated way, reaching down as if I was a creaky old machine. In clown fashion, I looked in the eyes of each of my audience members, smiling and enjoying the effort and, in a typical clown turn, my solution created more problems and I became stuck in the bent position reaching for the paper. The now

laughing audience and participant looked on as, bent kneed, I hobbled back to the seat at my desk. The students were still smiling, rather gob smacked. After a few minutes, I smiled a big smile and leapt back into action to help students struggling with their work.

Following the bell, when students were slow to focus, I would mime outrageous behaviours. Once, while trying to get the class' attention, I gleefully eviscerated myself with an imaginary knife and mimed the pulling out of intestine as though it were linked sausage. The class took notice and I replaced the imaginary intestine, smiling at their bemused astonishment. On another occasion, using the same imaginary knife, I removed my brain to then squeeze it out like a sponge before returning it to the skull cavity.

Sometimes, I would have them re-teach me a concept that we had learned with hilarious results. "Teach me", I would request and then intentionally mis-hear their words, misunderstand them or take their words literally. General mayhem would ensue: the children delighting in the buffoonery of their teacher.

Careful not to shame or humiliate, I regularly poked fun at my students. When a boy stole a girl's purse in a flirting interaction, I seriously asked him, "When did you start carrying a purse? That colour is great with your jeans." I would then smile a big smile and the boy would respond in a playful way. When I wore a Vancouver Canucks jersey during play-offs, a student who was a Habs fan told me, "Take that jersey off!" I retorted, "No way! I am a teacher!" These interactions, where the clown/teacher takes a student's word literally or responds with seriousness at a student's buffoonery, contribute to a shared positive experience.

If a child initiated play with repetitive words or gesture, I would respond. For example, if Berni was to tell me, “I am done done, Ms. Diatimo.” Then in mock seriousness, I would say, “Good to meet you, Done-done. I am Diatimo-Diatimo.” This nonsensical interaction would continue as long as the student wanted to play.

Shut down students, such as Chris, would usually respond when I warned them that their arm would be stuck to their head if they kept that position too long. I would demonstrate the unfortunate position and soon they would laugh and answer in an offbeat way.

Another tactic to invite play was to animate objects. This might mean that a confiscated toque became a puppet that discussed with its owner how it preferred not to come to school. Surprisingly, students interacted with the ‘puppets’ and even contributed their own altered voices to the conversation. A pencil can speak to its student. A book can talk.

In addition, play can be invited when an item is used for something that it is not. For example, a calculator could be a cell phone or a pen could be a magic wand or a microphone. Essential here is that the teacher invites the play and then listens carefully for the invitation to be answered and returned.

Further, the students loved the introduction of ‘imaginary’ items. The following scenario illustrates a lovely example of both non-traditional use of an item and the use of imagination to aid in classroom management and build relationships. One chronic problem had been that students would throw themselves on the floor and refuse to get up. Consequences and anger from me would have no result. Instead, I took to initiating playful interactions. On one occasion, with a student lying supine on the floor, I used a

banana to call an ambulance attendant to give artificial respiration. We joked about how the attendant would have terrible breath and body odor. The student made an immediate recovery and was back working in his/her seat. On another occasion, several students were lying on the floor when I announced that I had an imaginary stick and would poke them until they got up. I mimed poking the poor things and they jumped up. I set the imaginary stick on a shelf to use later, if necessary and a playful student retrieved it to begin a mock sword fight with me. Of course, I had to defend myself with another imaginary stick.

Anecdotes like this that involve an invitation to play and the subsequent responses are ubiquitous in a clown teacher's classroom but the scenes are not as important as the connection. Clown is about authentically connecting with the audience. Relationships are fostered in the simple act of making eye contact and pausing to really see a student. From this, the clown/ teacher can discern if an invitation to play is possible. This simple initial action, to pause and make sure that each student is really seen and considered each day, or even every hour, is essential and builds strong rapport.

How did you deal with otherness?

As an 'other' or non-Aboriginal teacher, I needed to recognize with my students that white too is a colour and that "being color blind in the classroom where different colors are present neglects the possibility of learning who we are, how we got to the front of the classroom, and how re-markings and new positions can be built" (Mackie, p.35). In a joking way, I could talk about the fault of my genes for giving me thin hair that easily breaks and that the culture that I could most easily share included Shreddies.

Over time, the children became more playful with me, modelling back the 'games' which I had initiated with them. Deciding to delight in my students has made a difference. Modeling appropriate and fun interactions has helped students to become more comfortable, more open to interaction, and more willing to take academic and social risks.

How did you speak to students?

A teacher must address her students many times each day. I wanted to be aware of what I called them as the much repeated phrase most certainly would stick in their memories. I chose not to use, 'you guys,' as it excluded the females in the class. I did not use the word, 'friends' because I was not that to students. I chose to address them as simply as 'students', but I often added descriptors: my honourable students, my respectful students, my hard workers. Mindful of a time when I used to buy café latte in an Italian café and old woman who served me, greeted me daily by calling me, "Beautiful," I called my female students, "Beauty" and "Lovely." I addressed male students as Mr. Chris and Mr. Raymond in mock seriousness.

I also tried to keep my admonitions somewhat funny. A little misdemeanor would mean that a student was called, 'a noodle' while a larger offence would lead to a warning, 'Now you are in the dog's house,' and a smile. I knew that my efforts were worthwhile when I heard students call each other "noodles" instead of more serious put-downs. Through positive modelling, the students' actions changed.

What did you do when you were frustrated?

Some students are not easily lovable. It is the responsibility of the teacher to find some part of the student, some image of them, some aspect, some skill, attribute or action

that is intensely lovable. This must be on the forefront of a teacher's mind when they are dealing with students, especially at times that their behaviour is irritating. Just as a clown operates from a place of nonjudgmental caring, so must a teacher. She must be a massive caring presence in the classroom, cultivating a compassionate curiosity. One example of this is that I tried to ask more questions than pass quick judgements. I also expressed my caring overtly. I taught students the acronym: "I LARCH you" and regularly told them. "I love you, appreciate you, respect you and cherish you," at the end of the day. Often, when I had to be away, I would leave this in a note on the board to bridge the separation.

Indeed, teacher must model patience and forgiveness - where each day begins anew. This type of self-awareness and control is difficult. Sometimes, when things ran amuck in the classroom, I would allow myself outbursts in Spanish where I could speak my mind and students would hear the tone of the message but not be harmed by any words. They were even amused by the ridiculousness of it. When I had let the frustration go, I could smile at the ridiculousness of my own actions and begin anew.

What about interactions between students?

A good relationship with me was not enough. Major arguments and disagreements between students could arise during class. Dealing with issues as they arose in a piecemeal, reactive fashion did not work well. It was not enough to help them focus on academic tasks and work together with their teacher nearby to referee. Students needed to be shown how to positively interact with each other while being supported through the process.

An extra hour was added to our biweekly cooking class and it became our venue to build relationships. We peeled apples in long circular strands and together, we threw the strands over our shoulders. As we turned, we could see the letter that the peelings had made. This, I declared, was the first letter of the name of the person you will marry. The class bantered together, laughing and discussing whether their classmate would marry a Victor or a Vince, Monica or Madeline. Tensions were calming in their enjoyment together. This type of activity, without competition, winners or losers was a typical clown game: the students could play with the letter and make up silly names for their classmate's future partners without much risk.

The apples were made into apple crumble. The table was set and the class sat to share a meal. Before commencing, I introduced the idea of a gratitude circle and each student took time to express thanks. We were beginning to gel as we played more together as a class.

How did you bridge separation?

As in many classrooms, each Monday could be a difficult readjustment for my students. I struggled to find ways to bridge this separation with mixed success. These were the days when students were most challenging yet, I made sure to keep the students close and extremely rarely sent a child out of the room. Bad behaviour yielded more time with me and oddly, this developed our relationships. I had more time to get to know the offenders and they became the ones to visit me each morning and offer assistance.

Some students faced further separation when they were suspended by the school administration. My heart would ache for them, as breaking their connection to school was so risky for their future. I would reassure them during these suspensions that I was

still their teacher, that we would get through this and I made calls to their homes to check in with them during their suspensions. On some occasions, a student and I would send letters back and forth during a suspension, not only to keep the student writing during his/her absence but also to keep the student part of the fabric of the class by hearing our news.

Do you have a final reflection, Ms. Diotima?

There is a story from China about a gardener who wanted his crops to grow more quickly so he crept out at night and tugged on each of his seedlings, pulling them up towards the sun. In the morning, his son found the wilted plants, pulled out by their roots. When I look back on the unit and our stretch toward writing hip hop lyrics, I feel some chagrin. I may have been the gardener who tugged her seedlings.

Like you, my work history has been with adults in university settings or in ESL programs. Learning outcomes had to be accomplished in three months. This work was different. Students needed an ongoing multitude of relationship building interactions to trust a new teacher.

What is a relationship building interaction? A smile, a meeting of the eyes, a pause to really see the student, an uplifting word, a look that conveys love and understanding, a reassurance that things will be alright, an expression of concern, a playful comment that invites the student to respond in a playful way, a sincere recognition of their courage to try something new, an overheard comment to another teacher about something good about the student, an invitation to play, an expression to the class about an ‘anonymous’ student and something that they got just right in their work, a thank you for anything that the student has done that helps the class, a welcoming

smile, a wave goodbye, a moment just to smile at the students, saying their name in a positive tone, a little chat before school, noticing a positive change in the student's clothing or appearance, a little joke.

I think of the story of the TV you wrote about in your literature review and the complaints that the villagers had after a stranger had left it in their village to tell them stories. The villagers had complained, "The TV knows many stories, but the TV does not know us." This had been my blind spot. Much time was needed to really know and be known by students. When I considered the common trait of shyness, I realized that students are not shy in their own families or with people known to them. Shyness vanishes as we are known to each other. Confidence grows.

With time and patience, we are learning. "We are simply creatures", as Paulo Freire says, "equal together, attempting to learn more than they know" (p.82). I had been caught in a traditional western understanding of learning and had wanted something tangible to show for our efforts. Just as other teachers may be stuck on the performance of students and not their ontological change, I may have focused on devising techniques to support, scaffold and elicit ever more sophisticated critical thinking. I had somehow forgotten that learning is a transforming process and that I too was transforming beside my students. Indeed, Richard Wagamese insists that the teacher is part of the transformative process and must demonstrate her own transformation: "When you create along with your students, you actually create a circle of creative energy and it takes every person to make that happen- including you" (Wagamese, p.24). I had to let our relationship deepen and then, students would want to do great things for me as they had trusted my care for them.

My students burst in to the classroom now. They tell me stories, fill my head with their dreams, troubles and laughter. They ask me questions, begging for more stories of my odd and funny past. This is the unscripted curriculum.

We have returned to the project. Last week, I introduced the Looper app, which is a beat box application. With 6 different tracks, a person can build soundscapes and ambient sound tracks. We are layering English words with the First Nations language that they are learning. The recorded loops catch our laughter and my outrageous admonitions, “Your turn, my silly noodle.” This is the unscripted curriculum. I have decided that learning is not all cognitivist: much of it is emotional and all learning must take place in the rich atmosphere of love and caring. Now, each morning, I anticipate that my students will delight me. I look forward to a day of play.

Thank you, Mrs. Diatimo for letting me borrow your voice to tell a story that is truer than if it had happened at all.

“There are no truths...” I say. “Only stories.”

(King, 2011, p. 86).

Chapter Four: Reflection

Summary of the Project

This project examines one teacher's lived experience as she worked in a First Nations school for the first time. Informed by narrative inquiry, the project documents the many frustrations and few successes experienced as the students were led through the process to learn how to write hip hop lyrics and create beat box rhythms using oral stories as their inspiration and starting place. Although the anticipated outcomes included written hip hop lyrics based on traditional First Nations stories, the teacher met failure. She had not been prepared how much of an impact students' emotional lives could have on their ability to learn. The project was put on pause. She returned to her original questions which drove her inquiry and inspired her in the first place: "How can I, a non-Aboriginal teacher connect and build with my students across this chasm of perceived difference?" "How can I increase their sense of safety to enable them to learn?" "Which tools from traditional Aboriginal cultural ways of knowing and contemporary youth culture can I incorporate in my curriculum to better engage my students?" "Could I use hip hop and storytelling in the classroom to promote wellness, to learn and to heal?" The project then focused on strategies and techniques which a teacher can use to build a positive relationship with her students. The project documents how students' self-confidence and ability to work independently benefit from increased efforts from the teacher to authentically connect. The project explores relationship building across cultural boundaries, focusing on clowning, play and pedagogical love. The project further makes recommendations on ways to incorporate clowning, play and other techniques to bridge separation, increase positive interaction between students and ensure strong rapport.

What Has Changed?

I began my Masters because I wanted to learn what makes a great teacher and then become one. I had naively thought that I would accumulate more knowledge and then think my way to becoming a better teacher but that was not how I experienced the program. This course has not been about adding on to who I am. In our final summer course in Campbell River, David Blades clarified the difference between epistemological knowledge and ontological knowledge. Then I really realized how I have been transformed by these courses. I am not piled higher with information; I have changed.

I feel that I am more comfortable in who I am and also have begun to understand the values inherent in traditional teachings. For example, the Lil'wat First Nations Principles of Teaching and Learning include the concept of 'cwelelep:' being in the place of uncertainty and anticipation. I now recognize the need to sometimes be in a place of dissonance and uncertainty, so as to be open to new learning. (Sanford, Williams, Hopper, McGregor, 2012, p.24). My comfort in 'cwelelep' is growing. I call it 'compassionate curiosity,' and seek to nurture this attitude within myself.

My perspective on education has changed. I think now that, by and large, our curriculum is moving from being a racist curriculum to a severely lopsided curriculum. It gives little space to other truths and frames of reference. I believe that by acknowledging that, my work can begin to spiral out from the confines of it. This program has made me aware of some of my blind spots. 'Cwelelep' and my new found comfort in it allows me to imagine that there are things I cannot yet see. I have begun to look for the underlying pattern beneath appearances and this has opened up a new way of seeing and a new world of possibilities.

I have learned to think about where learning happens and how. It happens in the frustrations when a project does not go right. It happens in the fun of unanticipated success and in the spiralling around and around of what we believe. It happens in conversation. When we hear our own voices, our words change our thinking. Learning happens in the context of relationships. I think too now of how I design learning, that the shared experience of it can heal and build relationships. Deep learning through shared experience and dialogue can have a transformational quality.

I do not know what the future holds but I do know that through these Masters courses, I have felt the 'kamucwakalh,' another Lil'wat First Nations Principle of Teaching and Learning which means the energy that indicates an emergence of a group sense of purpose (p.23). My clown training has developed my intuition to feel the energy indicating group attunement and the emergence of a common group purpose. I have felt it now in the classroom as my students' confidence in me has given them confidence in themselves. They see themselves as valuable and now see value in learning. The unit on storytelling and hip hop may even have success now that our relationships are strong.

I am more comfortable and confident to teach now. Although some non-Aboriginal teachers stereotype Indigenous students as having a truly romanticized past history, I respect the multifaceted nature of each particular culture. I respect the richness of thought, organization and technology in pre-contact time and acknowledge the complexity, both in the past and present. The First Peoples' Principles of Learning states that learning involves recognizing that some knowledge is sacred and only shared with permission and/or in certain situations (2012). I am more comfortable in the not knowing. Moreover, by acknowledging my otherness in the presence of a rich traditional culture, I

recognize how respect is paramount in my behaviour and attitude. I do not act with a missionary zeal, believing that my Western ideas are the sole source of knowledge and being. I cultivate an attitude of compassionate curiosity.

When a non-Aboriginal teacher embarks on her journey with a group of Aboriginal students, she must be mindful of the pace of her students: the pace to build relationships, the pace to learn from her students, the pace to move through the curriculum, the pace to integrate the new information and make it theirs. Of course, a B.C. teacher could not abandon the scripted curriculum but a good teacher would put more emphasis on the unscripted curriculum that teaches a child that they have value. Good teachers like good clowns, are truly present in the classroom, deeply engaged with their students (their audience) and their subject. Connections made by good teachers are not found in their methods or contrivances but in their hearts – the place where intellect and emotion converge.

Annette Oberg explains how a non-Aboriginal teacher can be a positive agent in our mutual decolonization. Each day, as I view the forest from my classroom window, I consider her words:

Take Neil Evernden's explanation of a tree (as cited in 1993). He explains that: [a] tree is not so much a thing as it is a rhythm of exchange, or perhaps a center of organizational forces. Transpiration induces the upward flow of water and dissolvable materials, facilitating inflow from the soil. If we are aware of this, rather than the appearance of the tree form, we might regard the tree as a centre of a force field to which water is drawn. . . the object to which we attach significance is a configuration of the forces and relationships necessary to being a tree. . .

[Paying too much] attention to boundaries . . . obscure[s] the act of being itself. (p.134)

The tree is not a thing or a category, but rather it's a dynamic, living system and we need to interact with that (p. 136).

So now, I think I understand a little how each student is a tree in the forest. Each class is a dynamic living forest- each teacher, just another tree.

Future Implications

I am excited to continue to teach in this environment and would like to share my knowledge with my teaching colleagues in the hope that they too will be encouraged. The process of writing this reflection has made me realize that the immense passion that I have to communicate and teach students through a deep relationship fueled by play and clowning. I will continue trying to instill in my students – all of them – that they are worthy and that our relationship is bigger than any problem that we encounter.

Maybe I could teach clown to students. I had believed that students would feel too vulnerable to explore this art form yet I see that playfulness could be further encouraged with drama and clown games. The benefits would be great. Clowns learn how to “see (them) selves in all directions and laugh at the beauty of (their) ridiculousness” (Morrison, 2013). This deep level of self-acceptance is healing. When a clown displays her shame when she makes a mistake and then moves through this to another feeling, the audience (and clown) can discharge their negative feelings. In this, clowns help heal emotional pain. Laughter releases tension.

I would like to explore this.

I also want to explore hip hop with more vigour and have begun wordsmithing on my own to create relevant songs. I consider that by tackling this topic with less urgency, in a second round, further interesting questions would emerge.

Recommendations for Educators Considering a Similar Topic

As a mere graduate student, I will borrow heavily from the words of Annette Oberg to explain the process: “The ground is ever shifting and the struggle to maintain a footing is continuous” (Oberg, 1990, p. 219). As you investigate and practice, your sense of the project will change, rolling over itself, in time. This is so evocatively said by Prendergast (2007), “who channels story/ streams meaning/ waterfalls/ metaphor/ self over self/ over character/ over self/ who tumbles /bright-pebbled memories” (p.743). As a teacher/student reflects upon their project and keeps their questions turning back upon themselves, the meaning within the inquiry will transform. The project will make its student/ teacher delve into the deeper, phenomenological issues of “Who I am as educator?” (Oberg, 1990, p. 214), “Who am I becoming?” (p. 217), and “What is taken for granted here?” (Chambers, 2004, p. 250).

Be courageous. Your reflectiveness as a teacher is crucial to what students can learn about being reflective. It is crucial because what students learn through their interactions with a teacher depends on their experience of that teacher (Oberg, 2004, p. 242). Teaching proceeds as a creative engagement within the teaching environment (p. 240).

When you allow yourself to inquire into something that interests (you) deeply, (you) are already researching (p.240). Be genuinely compassionately curious: paying attention and not knowing are key. Be prepared to think through the difficult stuff. When

you lose heart, remember “We write and research to figure something out”

(Chamber, 2004, p. 10)- and follow the path with heart. Study clown and play with your students.

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