

A Mother's Hopes and Dreams for her Daughter: The Parallel Journey Between two
Mohawk Leaders in Different Contexts and Careers

by

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B.Ed., University of Victoria, 1994
M.Ed., Simon Fraser University, 1996

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of the Requirements for the Degree of

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Abstract

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Educational institutions have not yet succeeded in their quest to formally educate Aboriginal students with success. In an effort to increase the graduation levels, many school districts have implemented mandates to hire more Aboriginal teachers and administrators. Through sharing her lived experience as an Indigenous elementary principal the researcher argues that although many bureaucratic organizations have formal policies to hire Aboriginal people into leadership positions, they still seek to maintain their power to keep the status quo in their organizations.

This qualitative autoethnographic study acknowledges Indigenous ways of knowing through the sharing of stories and experience. The experiences will highlight emotional and cultural struggles that one can face when differing cultures and values emerge in a bureaucratic system based on colonialist viewpoints. Due to the vantage point of an insider, the researcher has traced her life from childhood and shared experiences and stories as a mixed-blood Mohawk woman and leader in the education system. Through an examination of signifying moments these stories depict a personal struggle for identity in her role as a female Mohawk principal in a school with a predominant Aboriginal student population. Chosen stories and incidents are recounted

to reveal the social, political, historical, institutional, and cultural systems that are embedded within society. Both the researcher and her mother's stories are universal in terms of experience that transcends understanding among Aboriginal people who are aiming to create organizational change.

This genre of qualitative research will allow the reader to see the ongoing transformation that has occurred in the researcher's first five years as an administrator in the public school system. Her upbringing and her mother's teachings are internalized and become the catalyst for navigating through turbulent times and allow for continuing growth as an Indigenous leader in education.

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Dedication

I would like to dedicate this writing to my greatest accomplishments, my three beautiful, intelligent and amazing daughters. You have all been the light of my life, and I am a better woman for having had the honor of being your Mom. Thank you for understanding at such a young age how important it was for me to continue my schooling. I hope that you can learn from me and your Kokum's teachings how important it is that you try to make a difference in this world for our People. Continue to be the strong woman warriors that you are. I love you all. Now go forth and conquer!

Disclaimer

The stories and instances that are recounted in this dissertation have their origins in the lived experiences of the researcher as an Indigenous woman. Respecting these events requires an honest retelling and analysis of these events. Such a retelling carries no intention to dishonor or disrespect any of the individuals whose actions comprise the events being portrayed. An obligation to the researcher's truth, however uncomfortable or messy it may be, is balanced with anonymity as a protection for those represented within the events that are examined as part of the dissertation.

Chapter I

Introduction

When I was a young girl I dreamed of having a big house and nice furniture. I would take the Sears catalogue, scissors and glue, and I would cut out the furniture that I would buy for my beautiful house in the future. Every fall the arrival of the Sears catalogue and going back to school were an equally exciting event. My big dreams began as a youngster, and allowed me to escape when times were difficult. Dreams were also encouraged by my mother while growing up in poverty in Winnipeg, Manitoba.

I began my journey into this world being born one month premature, and was described as “sickly” by my mother until I reached kindergarten. Although born in Edmonton, Alberta, I grew up in Winnipeg. I was raised by my mother, who was a single parent for most of her adult years. My mother was born to a Mohawk mother and father, and was raised on the Six Nations of the Grand River in Ohsweken, Ontario, Canada, until she left home at 14 years of age. I am of mixed blood, and am proud to say I am a Mohawk woman from the Turtle Clan of the Kahniakehake People –People of the Flint.

When I was a young child I did not realize the extent of our poverty. Children often normalize their situations and do not comprehend they are different until an event occurs that changes their mindset. I realized we were poor when I had the rare opportunity to visit a friend’s house in grade three. Usually we were expected home right after school to complete chores so we generally did not play at friends’ homes very often. Upon my arrival, I was taken aback by the lovely furniture, the cleanliness, and

the presentation of milk and cookies upon our appearance. Some of the furniture looked like it might have been from the Sears catalogue! I was eight years old and will never forget that moment of realization that our family was different. At my friend's house it was like I was in the Leave it to Beaver household – a place that seemed out of this world. I recognized that I liked it and became resentful of my home situation. I was sad because the truth was staring at me in the face every time I came home. I didn't want to be a poor kid – I wanted more out of life.

Poverty was prevalent for all of my childhood, much like it is for many Aboriginal children. I recall many days during my junior high days where my older sister and I would walk the two kilometer distance to and from school during the lunch hour only to come home to find little, if any food in the house. We did not bother taking a lunch with us, because we did not have any food to take. We had too much pride and would rather come home and eat a piece of stale bread than to stay at school and eat nothing in front of our peers. Our friends and teachers said that we were lucky to be able to go home to eat our lunch, but little did they know our reality or they might not have called us lucky. My memories of walking back and forth to school were when I attended grade seven and eight at John Henderson Junior High in Winnipeg. I did not complete grade nine at that school because I became pregnant at the age of 13 and had to leave my peer group for the remainder of the 1977-1978 school year.

My mother raised her four children with the similar hopes and dreams that most mothers' have for their children – to complete school, attain post-secondary education, get a career, and to be better off financially than they were. My mother was quite proud that she never had to go on welfare, but looked forward to the Christmas hampers from

the Salvation Army so that she knew her children would receive presents. We were poor and perhaps because of racist stereotypes my mother would find it hard to secure employment and housing. I wonder if she had broken down and gone on welfare if we might have had more food to eat or more appropriate clothes to wear. She never wanted her children to be on welfare and considered it the worst thing possible. She had her pride and was determined to do good for her family even if it meant holding down two jobs. Along with Mom having dreams for me, she told me that the purpose of getting educated was to have a better life and to find ways to give back to our people. She raised me to be a proud Mohawk, but I was confused about what that really meant. My mother, born Mabel Froman, later to change her name to Debra Black-Froman, was attaining a higher education from the mid-1970s right up until the mid-1990s. Being educated was important for my mother and she endeavored to pass this value down to her children.

Mom was devastated when I became pregnant at 13 years old. In the 1970s, pregnant girls were not allowed to attend a regular school program, so I was sent to an alternative program offered through the Winnipeg School Division. Monday through Friday I made the 45 minute bus ride to the YWCA in downtown Winnipeg to attend school along with 12 or so other pregnant teenage girls. I was the youngest girl in the program, and this was a source of embarrassment for me for the five months I attended the program. I was independent at a young age, and did not *feel* like I was only 13 years old. My teachers and classmates were told that I would be giving the baby up for adoption in the spring of 1978. Debra felt that my life would be over if I kept the baby, and that I could never have a chance at a happy, fulfilled life if I became a mother at the young age of 14.

Let us now fast forward to 2011. I have been married for over 27 years, and have three beautiful daughters. I now live in that big beautiful house that I once dreamed of, and actually do have some furniture from Sears. My eldest was born in March 1978; I was married in 1984 and two babies followed in 1985 and 1986. Yes, I kept my beautiful brown haired girl and I thank her for saving and transforming my life. At that time I was starting to experiment with drugs and alcohol, and becoming a teenage mother made me grow up quickly. Like my own mother wanted for me, I wanted my daughter to have a better life than I had. I have spent my adult years doing my best to realize my mother's dream of having a "happy, fulfilled life" and to make a difference for Aboriginal children through my career choices. My mother was very proud of me when I received my undergraduate degree in education in 1994 and my graduate degree in 1996. Sadly, she passed away before I started my doctoral journey. She journeyed to the Spirit World on August 22, 2001. It is because of her that I aimed to achieve my Ph.D., and because of her that I write this story.

I was the third born child to Debra and my blonde hair, blue-eyed Norwegian father that I never knew. Debra was an incredible woman who excelled in her line of work as a social worker and then in the field of corrections as a probation and parole officer. Debra faced many obstacles in her life, both personally and professionally, and was described as a leader and change agent by her peers. I have faced similar challenges particularly in the professional realm. Throughout my life my mother was there to guide me along my journey, share her stories, and pass along her cultural teachings. Although she is now gone she continues to guide me, as do my ancestors through blood memory. This unique memory is what enables me to be guided through difficult experiences now

that my mother is deceased (Garrouette, 2003; Momaday, 1975). It is perhaps because of my mother's passing that these memories have come alive to open my spirit to something that Dillard describes as "...the knowledge, wisdom, and ways of our ancestors [that] are a central and present part of everything that has existed, is existing, and will exist in what we call the future" (as cited in Denzin & Giardina, 2009, p. 221).

I began my career as an elementary teacher, and for the past six years have been a school administrator in three schools at the kindergarten to grade five level. This autoethnography will share my life journey, and how the teachings of my mother have helped to guide me on what I consider to be, my predetermined path to be of service to Aboriginal students in the education system. This is a story about the parallel lives between a Mohawk mother and her daughter.

Statement of the Problem

Educational institutions have not yet succeeded in their quest to formally educate Aboriginal students with success. For example, during the 2009-10 school year in British Columbia, only 49% of Aboriginal students finished school with a Certificate of Graduation (Dogwood Diploma) compared to 72% of non-Aboriginal students in the system (<http://www.bced.gov.bc.ca/abed/perf2010.pdf>). Seeing less than half of our Aboriginal students graduate is not acceptable in this day and age, and consequently we have a long way to go in order to reach parity. It is our moral imperative to implement school and structural changes in order to see a positive shift in Aboriginal student graduation rates. In an effort to increase the graduation levels, many school districts have implemented mandates to hire more Aboriginal teachers and administrators. Battiste & McLean (2005) suggests there has been an assumption that First Nations

educators know what is needed and are expected to be the “solution to the systemic issues affecting student disaffection with education” (p. 8).

Coming from a critical perspective lens, I assert that although bureaucratic organizations have mandates to hire Aboriginal people into leadership positions, they still seek to maintain their power to keep the status quo in their organizations. Aboriginal leaders hired to management-type positions may initially be under the impression that they were hired to be change agents and a voice for Aboriginal students, in fact, the structures of power deployed in the construction and maintenance of its own power leads to disempowerment of others’ perspectives, ways of being and knowledge (Denzin & Giardina, 2009). Speaking from an Indigenous perspective becomes problematic when cultures, values, and viewpoints do not mesh, or when Aboriginal people are expected to conform to the dominant culture’s expectations to maintain status quo norms (Kanu, 2005). An Aboriginal leader needs to be informed, reflective, insightful, open and willing to find ways to mitigate the pressures of the organization and the internal conflicts that will arise from such a dichotomy.

Although we are in the 21st century, we continue to see status quo remain for the most vulnerable population in Canada. In my role as an Indigenous leader, I aim to make change based on what I perceive as being necessary in a public, off-reserve school with a large populace of Aboriginal students. I speak from the perspective of someone who has been immersed in my school culture and can share the realities of being a mixed-blood Mohawk leader working in a bureaucratic system that *talks* about change for Aboriginal students, but does not necessarily *walk the walk*. My experience within the school has informed my current practice and has reaffirmed that structural change needs

to occur in a timely manner. The recommendations I propose in the final chapter reveal that changes need to be made in order for progress to occur and the school experience to become positive for Aboriginal students. We need to create a new memory for the present and upcoming generations of Aboriginal students. Through this autoethnography and use of stories, the voice of a Mohawk school principal is used to speak against and to a hegemonic colonial school system that has been in place since Aboriginal students have been mandated to attend school.

Statement of Purpose

The purpose of this study will be to unveil certain personal life experiences and signifying moments that have resonated with me as a female Aboriginal leader working within an educational system based on colonialism. These events and situations involve taking a closer look at systemic factors within our White settler society. Razack (2002) explains this concept further:

A white settler society is one established by Europeans on non-European soil. Its origins lie in the dispossession and near extermination of Indigenous populations by conquering Europeans. As it evolves a white settler society continues to be structured by a racial hierarchy. In the national mythologies of such societies, it is believed that white people came first and that it is they who principally developed the land; Aboriginal peoples are presumed to be mostly dead or assimilated. European settlers thus become the original inhabitants and the group most entitled to the fruits of citizenship. A quintessential feature of white settler mythologies is, therefore, the disavowal of conquest, genocide, slavery, and the exploitation of the labour of peoples of colour. In North America, it is still the

case that European conquest and colonization are often denied, largely through the fantasy that North America was peacefully settled and not colonized (p. 2).

Further, I will explore how I have searched for identity within my leadership role, and how my mother's influence has impacted me as I continue to grow and learn in the role of an Indigenous principal. The stories and incidents described in this work are not a reflection of individuals' or any school district's motivations or their professionalism. These stories and incidents are recounted to reveal the social, political, historical, institutional and cultural systems in which the researcher and possibly others connected to my position are embedded. Because of this, the confidentiality of persons used in my writing will be maintained, with the exception of using my mother's real name. I have also changed the names of family, teachers, principals, colleagues, schools, and sometimes genders of the people involved. The goal of this research is to hopefully assist other Aboriginal colleagues and educational peers to reflect on their own careers and experience as an educational leader. Their experiences may or may not relate to my stories, or that of my mother's, however, the reader can take what they wish to employ in their own leadership journey.

Research Questions

My narrative analysis of being an Aboriginal woman and leader in the education system will revolve around examining the following three questions and issues:

- 1) What are the expectations that I place on myself as a Mohawk woman working as a principal, and how do these expectations determine how I develop as a leader in the school system?

- 2) How can my Aboriginal cultural teachings, experience, and understanding be developed and further enhanced while working in a colonialist bureaucratic organization based on status quo norms?
- 3) How are both my Mohawk mother's story and my own, universal in terms of experience that transcends understanding among Aboriginal People who are aiming to create organizational change?

Operational Definitions

For the purpose of this study, the following definitions apply:

Aboriginal: Refers to all people of Aboriginal ancestry, including Status, non-Status, Inuit, Métis, and mixed-ancestry. I use the words Aboriginal and Indigenous simultaneously. The term 'Indian' is used only if it is relevant to the context at the time in my story. "Indian" is a contrived term used by the government, and is not meant to be derogatory in any way. It is used to reflect that current context of the political norm of referring to Indigenous peoples in certain times in Canadian history.

Autoethnography: A highly personalized genre of writing and research where the author uses her own personal experience to further understand her own culture. It is considered an authentic way for someone to tell what happened to her, from her point of view (Eisenhart, 2005).

Blood memory: Is the knowledge of culture given to us through our Aboriginal ancestors (Garrouette, 2003; Momaday, 1975). It may also be referred to as Indigenous memory.

Culture: People that hold the same values, beliefs and traditions.

Enfranchisement: Loss of Indian status and band (tribe) membership in return for Canadian citizenship and the right to hold land in fee simple (Gilbert, 1996).

Field Notes: Notes taken from events and situations that are experienced by the researcher. Field notes can be single words, sentences or short paragraphs (Spradley, 1979).

Reflective Journal: A personalized diary or journal account. They form a deeper analysis of the field notes. The entry also includes a self-reflection of the event as well as factual information. Self-reflection includes the researcher looking back on herself to understand motives, feelings, and to evaluate the learning from the event.

Limitations

This research is autobiographical in nature. The stories are meant to promote insight and are open to interpretation by the reader. The study is limited in its scope as the experiences, observations, and interpretations of such are related to my career and personal life. My intended use of the autoethnography is a way to tell a story or series of stories that invites personal connection rather than analysis. The stories I share are *my truth*, and I invite the reader to take from it what resonates for them.

Design of the Study

This is an autoethnographic piece of literature. The “self” is the primary data source, along with the experiences and events that occur. Autoethnography is a current attempt to *come to terms* with sustaining questions of self and culture (Neumann, 1996). Holt suggests that “qualitative researchers need to be story tellers, and storytelling should be one of their distinguishing attributes” (2003, p. 5). It seems to be the natural fit for my storytelling abilities, my questions of self, and how my Mohawk culture fits in

to my career life and choices I have made. An individuals' sense of self, or identity, can be understood through stories, and these stories reveal the ways in which "individuals know themselves and their lives" (Drake, Spillane & Hufferd-Ackles, 2001, p. 2). Each chapter will have different stories based on my own or my mother's experiences throughout our lives. The stories will have links to the relevant research shared in the first few chapters of the dissertation.

Significance of the Study

The primary goal of this study is to provide prospective Aboriginal educators with a personal account of how a female Mohawk leader has chosen to navigate the multiplicity of being in two different worlds: of being an Aboriginal leader and working in a bureaucratic system with conflicting rules and systems, and of being mixed-blood (Mohawk and Norwegian) in a society that continuously wants to instill labels. Secondly, this study is to highlight the similarities of experiences of two female Aboriginal leaders working in different decades and career fields who aim to make organizational change. Stories that I share are ones that are not often heard, or are discounted. "Moving from silence into speech is for the oppressed, the colonized, the exploited, and those who stand and struggle side by side, as gesture of defiance that heals, that makes new life and growth possible" (bell hooks in Neumann, 1996, p. 191). Aboriginal voice has been rarely heard and when it has it is often misinterpreted by the dominant culture (Foster & Mühlhäusler, 1996). It is timely that an Aboriginal voice, my voice, comes through to share experiences that are important to be heard, listened to, and perhaps considered when Aboriginal people consider pursuing or are pursued for the field of school or district administration. Using my voice was one of the major teachings

my Mom taught me, and although it was difficult at times it was not only necessary to do, but the correct, *just* thing to do. Leadership from a “life-story point of view is still scarce in general, and virtually non-existent with respect to the topic of authentic leadership development,” and will be examined in this study (Shamir, Dayan-Horesh & Adler, 2005, p. 413). Thirdly, this inquiry shares a personal story of the relationship between a Mohawk mother and her daughter of mixed-blood. This study will demonstrate how the cultural teachings have impacted the life choices and challenges that the researcher has faced, and how morals and values have affected the leadership journey thus far. It is also a way to honor my mother and perhaps place closure on the grief felt at losing her when I was 37 years old and yet to enter the field of administration. Engaging in the process of going deep inside myself can stimulate the beginning of recovery, and I hope readers can benefit as well. Consequently, this autoethnographic piece will share a personal account of my experiences as a Mohawk woman of mixed-blood, as an educational leader, and as a doctoral candidate.

Contents of the Dissertation

This dissertation is divided into ten major chapters. Chapter I contains an introduction, a statement of the problem, a purpose statement, limitations, design of the study and operational definitions. Chapter II contains a literature review of both leadership and identity theories. Methodology and procedures are contained in Chapter III. Chapter IV sets the stage of the rest of the narrative – the sudden, but expected passing of my mother. Dialogue is interwoven in Chapters IV-IX with theoretical notions about poverty, racism, identity and leadership throughout the chapters. Chapter V shares my early years of growing up in poverty and the many secrets that I needed to

keep as a young girl, including that of being Mohawk. It also shows the teachings that resulted in life lessons then and later. In Chapter VI the stories continue to depict how fast I had to grow up, including moving out on my own at the age of 15. Chapter VII shares the early years of being independent and marriage with more children. In Chapter VIII, the next phase of my education begins with going back to school and dealing with racism at a personal level. Chapter IX shares how the teachings from childhood and young adulthood have affected me as a person and as a new administrator. This chapter will share the signifying events as a leader that caused me to reflect, and analyze the potential lesson that was meant to be learned, particularly when working in a school with a large population of Aboriginal students. Throughout my story I share the highlights of my mother's career in both social work and corrections, and the impact she had in her career and as a single mother to four children. Finally, Chapter X will share the parallel connections between my mother and I that were drawn from the stories, recommendations for schools and districts, and my overall reflections.

Chapter II

Part I: Review of Literature – Leadership

Leadership

The first section of this chapter explores the educational literature relating to leadership in the educational field as well as Indigenous leadership. I am presently a fifth year elementary school principal in a Canadian school district of approximately 20,000 students. Before becoming a principal, my involvement with the British Columbia Teachers Federation (BCTF) provided me the opportunity to travel around the province delivering workshops to educators on the histories of Aboriginal students in British Columbia and Canada. I have gained the reputation in my school district as being one of the “experts” or leaders in Aboriginal education. Being labeled an expert is not only uncomfortable for me, but daunting. Can one person really be the expert, particularly on all Aboriginal Peoples in Canada? There is pressure to be the cultural broker for all Aboriginal people. As an educator and an Aboriginal person, I consider any accomplishments as part of my life duties – to educate and help other Aboriginal people. I do not do things to deliberately be singled out or recognized, yet I have been. Perhaps this is because I am one of a very small number of Aboriginal administrators in the two school districts I have worked in. Conceivably one of the reasons that we have few female Aboriginal leaders in education is because of being humble and not wanting to be “singled out to stand above others” (McLeod, 2007, p. 3). Not singling out others is part of the Mohawk cultural teachings that were taught to me as a child, and I carried this teaching as I became a teacher myself. I feel like I am still learning the skills necessary to be an excellent educational leader, and I certainly do not have all of the answers.

In 2007, as the lone Aboriginal principal in the school district, I was placed in a school with the highest population of Aboriginal students per capita. This was my first full year as a new elementary principal. Bell et al. (2004) and Fulford (2007) identify that one of the top key factors contributing to success in school is governance and leadership. The task of leading in a school with a significant number of needs, high poverty, the lowest test scores in the district, and being a visiting Mohawk woman to unfamiliar land would be a challenge. Through exploring basic theories of leadership and traditional Aboriginal leadership styles, I am coming to understand who I am as a school leader and Mohawk woman.

Leadership Theories

Great leaders move us. Great leaders can ignite the passion and inspire the best in others (Goleman, 2002). How does one become that person that inspires and moves others? This is a question I ask as a neophyte administrator. Are leaders born or made? I wonder if there might be a relationship between my mother being a leader in her field and me in mine. Avolio states that if a person embraces incremental theory (theory of the ‘self’) – and believes that leadership traits are malleable; he or she will view the act of leadership as evolving and fluid, and will confront challenges more positively (2007). I believe that transformation is bound to happen as leadership opportunities increase, experience grows, and the leader self-reflects. Leadership is a process of motivating and influencing others to work together collaboratively (Vroom & Jago, 2007). Taking on a leadership role requires a high level of energy, resolve and persistence (Shamir & Eilam, 2005), and is not a role that everyone wants to take on. My first few years have involved 10-12 hour days, some weekends, and a lot of creativity to keep balance in my life.

Working in a school with two local First Nations territories close by has also included politics as a factor to be negotiated in addition to the other needs in the school.

There are two main theories of leadership that have evolved since the 18th century: transactional and transformational leadership and various forms of each. My focus will be on transformational leadership and its three sub-theories: servant, emotional intelligence, and authentic leadership theories. Many characteristics are fluid and will be found in each of the theories. However, to begin the dialogue, I will explore the age old question of whether leaders are born or made.

Born Leaders

Are leaders born? Galton (1869) argued that the “personal qualities defining effective leaders were naturally endowed, passed from generation to generation” and qualities were present from birth (as cited in Zaccaro, 2007, p. 6). Avolio (2007) shares the evidence from behavioral genetics leadership research that suggests “...30% of the variance in leadership style and emergence can be accounted for by genetic predispositions...” (p. 28). Research continues to explore the link between genetics and how environmental factors can develop leaders.

In many traditional North American Aboriginal communities, chiefs were chosen by the people within the group, and therefore were groomed for the position (Washington, 2004). In this respect, Aboriginal leaders were born into their role. My people, the Kahnaikehake, used a clan system to help regulate Onkwehonwe society (Antone, 2000). The females were in leadership roles as the matriarchs of the family. The turtle clan members are the Leaders – this is my mother’s clan and therefore my clan. It seems natural then, that both of us became modern day leaders in each of our

chosen professions. I believe that my mother's teachings enabled me to grow into my educational leadership roles due to her grooming me as a child. She would say, "*The only way you are ever going to make it in life is if you get an education. You need to make it in the White man's world.*" I would hear this over and over again throughout my younger years. My mother enforced the values of a strong work ethic and made sure that homework was done every day with her close at hand should we need help. It was an expectation that we further our education past high school, and she spoke about the advanced degree that she was working on. As I was growing up, this dialogue was engrained and was considered the norm in our household.

As an educational leader, it is expected that you be able to share your voice and advocate for your students, school and district. I learned how to speak out and share my voice as a child, even when I was uncomfortable and scared. My mother allowed me to be shy to a point, but encouraged me to find my voice and use it when necessary. She shared that Aboriginal people were forced to be silenced for years, yet it is of utmost importance to speak out when there is injustice – particularly against Aboriginal people. This would be good training for me in later years when I became a public speaker and then a principal. Some qualities of an Aboriginal leader include a readiness to speak with emotion and be direct, respect silence, be a good listener and have "a strong belief in the value of historical and cultural meanings" (Sinclair, 2004, p. 15). Specific Mohawk teachings passed down from my mother include being respectful of others, recognizing the needs of others and sharing with them, being thankful for what you have and being an attentive and good listener. These cultural traits were valuable to me as I entered the field of education and today as a school leader.

Chosen and Made Leaders

Social scientists such as Max Weber retorted that leaders were not born, but chosen by social forces that required heroic models for the time (Avolio, 2007; Vroom & Jago, 2007). Major events in history were the result of heroic, charismatic leaders who changed the world in which they lived. In the 20th century, leadership traits became testable through intelligence, ability and aptitude testing performed by psychologists. Leaders could now be ‘tested’ as to their leadership abilities. However, in the early 1950s many researchers discarded trait-based approaches because they were insufficient to explain leadership effectiveness (Zaccaro, 2007). In the 1950s and 1960s, leaders were observed on their behavior and less on their traits.

In the late 1960s, social psychology researchers began to focus on how certain situations changed the leadership styles of leaders. This theory became known as Situational Theory, Pure Situational Theory, or Situational Leadership Theory (Vroom & Jago, 2007; Zaccaro, 2007). There seems to be no clear leadership theory or style that proves to be the best for all situations or workplaces. Situational theorists suggest that the “traits of leaders reflect the mechanisms by which they are selected, and their behavior is constrained by the situations they now face” (Vroom & Jago, 2007, p. 19). Leader traits and situational variables were developed in a Contingency Theory or Path-Goal Theory by Fred Fielder in 1967 (Avolio, 2007). Fielder suggested that a leader should be placed in a situation that is favorable to his or her style. Fulford asserts that situational leadership relates well to the styles of traditional Aboriginal leaders (2007).

Following Fielder’s logic, it may become more obvious as to why I was placed in my present school. Perhaps the district leaders felt that because I am an Aboriginal

person, I would “fit in” better into the climate and culture of the school. They also know that I am passionate about Aboriginal education. I consider myself to be a calm, quiet leader who listens to others, and perhaps these qualities were felt necessary for the school. This cannot be the sole logic though, because I have been called upon to present to teachers, staffs, and administrators in public situations where I am the lead presenter. Zaccaro points out that certainly “persons who emerge as leaders in one situation also emerge as leaders in qualitatively different situations” (2007, p. 10). The district had seen me lead in different environments before my appointment, and was confident that I had the necessary traits and qualities to succeed.

Leadership styles can range from democratic to directive, to shared and distributed (Lazaridou, 2007; Nicolaidow & Ainscow, 2005). As other individuals continually impact a new principal’s environment, the principal changes her perception, and then may change her style accordingly (Walker & Carr-Stewart, 2006). Kelley, Thornton & Daugherty (2005) suggest that there are four main styles of leadership: autocratic and delegating (both transactional), and democratic and participating (both transformational). I will explain what constitutes a transformational leader in more detail, as this theoretical model tends to fit who I am as a leader.

My Emerging Leadership Styles

Transformational Leadership

New principals, or neophytes, tend to question who they are, their capabilities, and what they should be doing after they become principals (Sanchez & Thornton, 2010; Walker & Carr-Stewart, 2006), and I am no exception. However, I do know that as a school leader I am committed to certain processes that help make connections between

my role, and those who follow me a smooth transition. A transformational leader is similar to a servant leader in that she is involved in ongoing dialogue about capacity building, shared values, commitment and collaboration which involves students, parents, community members and school staff (Fulford, 2007; Northouse, 2010).

Transformational leaders are said to “possess higher levels of emotional intelligence that heighten their awareness of their own and others’ emotions...” (Gardner, Avolio, Luthans, May & Walumbwa, 2005, ¶ 4). In a school such as mine, I believe it is integral that there be strong collaboration and commitment among staff, parents, and the school community.

I am dialoguing with the Aboriginal communities to reinforce the importance of having their children attend school regularly. Many Aboriginal schools indicate attendance and tardiness as ongoing problems, yet good attendance is an indicator of student success (Fulford, 2007). I understand the intergenerational effects of residential schools, and know that the local chief attended residential school as a child. Some of these intergenerational effects include physical and sexual abuse, drug and alcohol abuse, suicide, homelessness and poverty, fetal alcohol syndrome, and low self-esteem, to name a few (<http://www.wherethechildren.ca/en/exhibit/impacts.html>). Poverty is also an unmistakable factor in the lives of many Aboriginal families, particularly for those who live on reserves that lack opportunities for economic development. I understand the emotional trauma of residential schools from my mother and auntie’s perspective, and this allows me to truly empathize with the local Aboriginal communities. I attend monthly meetings at the Band office, where Band officials, district leaders, and parents have the opportunity to share concerns, ask questions and

receive attendance and assessment data on their children. Fullan (2002) points out that “if relationships improve, schools get better” (p. 18), and this is a goal for my school, staff, and the district. Where this concept proves to be difficult is when cultures collide – when one group (the Aboriginal community) may expect me to reflect the community position, and the bureaucracy in which I work expects adherence to systemic perspectives which are based on colonist viewpoints (Goddard & Foster, 2002).

A transformational leader needs to be concerned with short and long term goals of the school which are driven by data and input from staff and the principal. As a staff we are committed to keeping the students interested and engaged at school. Our school is at the early stage of integrating Aboriginal content into the curriculum – we are not at the point of curriculum infusion. Research has shown that both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students benefit from Aboriginal curriculum being implemented across the curriculum (Coughlin, 2005; Kanu, 2002; Kuykendell, 1992; Thayer-Bacon, 2003). Continued dialogue is necessary at my school to see more student successes such as: improved attendance, government mandated scores, reading marks, report card marks, and a more positive outlook toward school. The collaboration among staff and parents to help students succeed will continue to be an ongoing goal at my school.

Transformational leaders are concerned with values and ethics (Curtin, 1997; Northouse, 2010; Sagar, 1992). One of the first things that I did in a New Principal’s Meeting in June 2007 was to share what my values were that would transfer to my new school. I wrote that my end values are integrity, trust, respect for others, fairness, openness and being transparent with my decision making. These are also values which are shared by authentic leaders. A transformational leader cannot work alone to

accomplish these goals, and therefore she must bring others along to share in the vision, particularly in a school with Aboriginal students (Boyer, 2006). Spillane, Diamond & Jita assert that it is “highly unlikely that a principal practicing solo can improve instruction in his or her school” (2003, p. 542). However, working on other peoples’ values, beliefs and ideas to raise standards is no easy task (Neil, Carlisle, Knipe & McEwan, 2001).

Fullan suggests that if a leader can change what people in the organization value and how they work collaboratively to achieve a transformation of culture, this can lead to deep, lasting change (2002). Being a change agent requires having a moral purpose, and mine is to make a difference in the lives of Aboriginal students so that there can be parity and success for them within the school system. Success means different things for different cultural groups, of course, but what is required is a plan to help Aboriginal students achieve in school so they can have opportunities for a higher social status in society. The benefits to Aboriginal students gaining a high school diploma is ultimately of benefit to all members of society (Coombs, 1994). To do this, one must be willing to be open to the needs of students with unique needs and desires, and cultural backgrounds.

Servant Leadership

Servant leadership has been used in the field for over 30 years. Servant leadership is a term coined by Robert Kiefner Greenleaf in his 1970 essay entitled, *The Servant as Leader* (Crippen, 2005). Servant leadership refers to the leader serving the needs of his or her employees, customers (students) and community (Crippen, 2005; McLeod, 2007). The servant leader is “one whose leadership is deeply in a sense of

service to benefit the least privileged in society yet continue on the pathway for self-growth and autonomy” (Greenleaf, 1977, cited in Alston, 2005, p. 682). Ten characteristics of servant leadership are that the leader, 1) listens, 2) shows empathy, 3) is healing to self and others, 4) is aware, 5) is persuasive, 6) can conceptualize, 7) has foresight, 8) promotes stewardship, 9) is committed to the growth of others, and, 10) builds communities (Crippen, 2005). Servant leadership is congruent with some Aboriginal leadership philosophies (Jacobs & Witt, 2006; McLeod, 2007), and perhaps that is why this style of leadership comes naturally to me.

I am more of a “servant” in my school to the students than I am to the staff. This is directly because of the teachings from my mother to do good for our people. Because I am in education, the “people” refers to the students I serve. Aboriginal students deserve top quality instruction, materials, programs and services. Most union contracts require that teachers be hired to the school based on seniority first, not on qualifications or life experience. Although we have a school with a high percentage of Aboriginal students, I am not able to request teachers who have had experience working with Aboriginal students or the Aboriginal community. As a school leader, this makes it extremely difficult to hire the best person for the job, and at times, the school is forced to hire teachers who are not experienced, have no idea about the Aboriginal culture and histories within our community, and are there only to do “their time” until the next “better” position becomes available. It is interesting that school districts include supporting Aboriginal students in their accountability contracts or school board goals, yet those in power continue to maintain the status quo for Aboriginal students. Because Aboriginal students have been failed in the educational system for the past 100 years or

so, school boards need to make changes that positively affect Aboriginal learners. It should be the ethical necessity of school boards to be creative by changing policy and updating contracts, so that Aboriginal students are presented with top quality instruction, open-minded teaching staff, and resources that are relevant for their learning. When a principal has the ability and autonomy to hire those best suited for her school and its culture, the students ultimately benefit.

In a school such as my present one, it is easy for teachers or support staff to blame the parents, or worse, the students for their lack of success, interest, and behaviors in school. The role of the principal is important and greater in low income schools (Henchey, 2001); therefore the administrator needs to be carefully chosen. The role and quality of the classroom teacher is arguably as impactful to students' learning as well. "Teachers directly affect how students learn, what they learn, how much they learn, and the ways they interact with one another and the world around them" (Korkmaz, 2007, p. 390). A teacher's perspective and attitude can make the difference in a child's school life. Teacher's expectations for students' learning depend on what they believe a child is capable of. If they blame the child's home situation or poverty as reasons not to learn, they will lower their expectations. That is exactly the opposite of what Aboriginal students need. As a servant leader, I need to continue to listen, learn, use my voice to persuade, and help others to grow so that our school can move forward and challenge our students academically. These are culturally congruent ways of leading for me as an Indigenous leader. Culturally self-aware leaders are also able to recognize, acknowledge, and aim to understand the different cultural background of Aboriginal staff and community, without denying their identity in the process (Karim, 2003).

Leaders with Emotional Intelligence

Daniel Goleman (2002) helped to develop the concept of primal leadership, stating that the primal job of leadership is *emotional*. Being an emotional leader requires being able to look at issues from one's own perspective as well as others, being self-reflective, self-aware (Crippen, 2005; Fullan, 2002; Goleman, 2002; Karim, 2003; Ragland, 2006; Walker & Carr-Stewart, 2006), and transparent (Gardner et al., 2005; Goleman, 2002). Such characteristics are conducive to becoming an emotionally intelligent leader. Aspects of emotional intelligence contribute to strong transformational leadership, which leads to a principal's leadership effectiveness (Condren, Martin & Hutchinson, 2006; Mandell & Pherwani, 2003).

In a study conducted by Condren, Martin & Hutchinson (2003), results show that female leaders were "rated higher in effectiveness if their emotional intelligence levels were perceived as a strength" by the teachers that worked for them (¶ 5). Research from Mandell & Pherwani (2003) concludes that no differences were found between male or female leaders with emotional intelligence who operate through a transformational leadership model. However, women leaders are viewed more negatively if they employ an autocratic style of leadership versus a transformational style (Mandell & Pherwani, 2003).

I continue to work on becoming an emotionally intelligent leader. Goleman suggests that it is important that the leader be in tune to one's self before she can act upon the emotions of others (2002). In my quest to learn who my true self is, I am continually aware of how I act, and reflect on my actions regularly. As an Aboriginal person, I observe and aim to listen to everyone's voice before offering advice or making

decisions. I realize that these are not solely Aboriginal traits, but I was taught by my mother to be aware of my surroundings and scout things out before acting impulsively. My mother would tell me to observe first and foremost and only speak when necessary. She told me that when your heart starts to pound through your chest, it is time to think of your wording and speak out calmly. She, along with another Elder, taught me to “listen twice, speak once.” I have found that this works well for me, particularly in difficult situations.

Emotionally intelligent leaders “are not motivated by external rewards, such as money or titles, but rather by a strong need to meet their own high standards of excellence” (Goleman, 2002, p. 74). A common question I had been asked by my colleagues is how much more money I will be getting once I complete my doctorate. When I tell them that there is no extra money, they question why I would pursue a Ph.D. in the first place. Some people find it incredible that I chose to pursue a doctorate for my own self growth and not for career or individual incentives. As part of my Indigenous leadership style I am honest, care for others and focus on the community – and that of doing good for my people rather than for monetary gain or prestige (Jacobs & Witt, 2006). I have high expectations for myself, and this is because of my mother’s influence and the importance of education as the catalyst to making meaningful change in order to “give back.”

I admit that I expect a lot from myself and from others. My mother expected a lot from her children, and this has carried through for me as a leader and a mother. I would not ask another person to do a job that I would not personally do. I want to be the best person, leader, mother, wife, woman I can be, and at school doing the best for my

students is priority. My mother always said, “*If you want the job done right, do it yourself.*” As a transformational leader however, I continuously work on sharing leadership and putting trust in my staff that they will do a good job. Aboriginal female leaders need to work from “a vision of shared power, providing opportunities for all members to develop and use their leadership skills,” particularly when you work predominantly with female educators (Armstrong, 2005, p. 1). I have high expectations and therefore work to ‘read’ individuals to see if my gentle persuading may have turned into too much of a nudge or a push. The final leadership theory that speaks to me as an Aboriginal leader is the concept of authentic leadership.

Authentic Leadership Development Theory

In one of my job placements, I was placed with an educational leader who had differing values and viewpoints than me. I found myself in precarious situations where I was defending my morals and refusing to compromise my value system so that I could “fit in.” I came through that year by keeping my integrity intact, and holding my head high knowing that I followed through on my convictions and maintained my belief system. In essence, I remained true to myself. The term authenticity comes from the Greek meaning “to thine own self be true.” Gardner et al. describe authenticity as “*owning* one’s personal experience (values, thoughts, emotions and beliefs) and *acting* in accordance with one’s true self (expressing what you really think and believe and behave accordingly)” (2005, ¶ 2). Gardner et al. state that authentic leadership is at the base of transformational leadership (2005); however, Shamir and Eilam (2005) would disagree and say that authentic leadership is its own concept and should stand on its own. Research suggests that authentic leaders take their role as leader very seriously.

Shamir and Eilam (2005) suggest four aspects of an authentic leader:

- 1) they do not fake their leadership – they do not conform to others' expectations;
- 2) they do not take a leadership role on for status or rewards;
- 3) they are original people – they have internalized their values based on their own experiences;
- 4) their actions and talk are based on their beliefs and value system (p. 397).

I take my role as principal very seriously and continually ask myself who I am and who I want to be as a leader. I cannot be someone that I am not, and I do not conform to what others expect of me. I am my own person and am true to myself. I understand how people can put up false fronts, however for me; the only way I can be is real. Gardner et al. suggests that if we reflect through introspection, authentic leaders gain clarity and concordance with respect to their motives, emotions, goals, identity and core values.

Sinclair (2004) states that “leadership is often about resisting the expectations of institutions and not conforming to standardized ideas of what leaders and managers do...organizations are very adept at stealing your spirit” (p. 15). This is an interesting place to be considering that as an Aboriginal person I have accepted the Canadian education system as “right” because that is how I was entrenched into the system. Not questioning the status quo is common among Aboriginal people who have been assimilated into the ideals of the dominant culture (Goddard & Foster, 2002; McGrath & Stevenson, 1996). Over the past few years, I have also lived with the internal conflict that can occur when trying to navigate two different value systems that are contradictory. Henze & Vanett suggest that perhaps embracing a third world can provide

a more stable environment for the Aboriginal leader in the school system (1993). Instead of trying to fit in to either of the value systems, the key for me has been to embrace both systems to make it work for my situation. For the most part, this has enabled me to keep my morals and values intact and yet still adhere to the expectations of the establishment.

Authentic leaders lead by example, are self-aware, self-accepting and have authentic actions and relationships. Demonstrating one's core values to her followers leads them until they become authentic leaders themselves (Gardner et al., 2005). The authentic leader helps her followers to define their own values. This may not be an easy task however. If the followers lack self-clarity they can either adopt the leader's values and objectives, or be defensive and threatened and reject the leader as a source of influence (Gardner et al., 2005). Principals need to pay close attention to other's emotions and the motivation behind the person's behavior (Condren, Martin & Hutchinson, 2006). I realize that this takes time in any organization, and the first year or two is a time for others to observe, evaluate and come to know who their leader is on their own timeline and terms. I understand that some may never be open to my style of leadership or agree with my value system. In addition, how people perceive me as a leader and their expectations of me determine what I can and cannot do in the school (Krüger, 2008). Goleman (2002) asserts that if a leader is transparent and shows "an authentic openness to others about one's feelings, beliefs, and actions [this] allows integrity or the sense that a leader can be trusted" (p. 47). Self-awareness regarding my value system and then sharing this with others is a prerequisite for being an authentic leader.

Like an emotionally intelligent leader, an authentic leader grows over time. Life experiences shape who they are and they continually grow and further their self-development. Authentic leaders “find their voice by acting in the world, receiving feedback, and reflecting on the consequences of their actions” (Shamir & Eilam, 2005, p. 412). Social cognitive theory suggests that leaders learn from their environments and change how they will lead based on their own and others’ behaviors in a social environment (Walker & Stewart, 2006). It is through self-reflection, self-regulation and forethought that leaders learn to reach a higher sense of self-efficacy. Authentic leaders are malleable, as are the aspects of identity, and therefore it is expected that change occur dependent on the situations.

Leadership and School Culture

Whatever leadership style I possess or aspire to be, the effects of school culture cannot be underestimated. There are many implicit and explicit conceptions of school culture and how it is viewed by individuals (Sarason, 1996). Deal and Peterson (1999) explain school culture as “...unwritten rules and traditions, norms, and expectations that seem to permeate everything: the way people act, how they dress, what they talk about, whether they seek out colleagues or not ...” (pp. 2-3). Failing schools require educational reform, and culture needs to be taken seriously (Nicolaidou & Ainscow, 2005). School culture and school climate are interrelated, as one feeds off the other.

In 2007, it did not take long for me to see that my school suffered from a poor school climate, generated by the culture within the school. There was initially a great deal of reluctance towards change – even if the change was good. Kelley, Thornton & Daugherty (2005) point out that “without a climate that creates a harmonious and well-

functioning school, a high degree of academic achievement is difficult, if not downright impossible to obtain” (p. 19). On many occasions I have heard teachers comment on a new or different initiative, “Oh, we have tried that – it didn’t work,” or, “Been there, done that. You’ll get used to how things are around here.” This cynical attitude needs to be met with empathy mixed with support, communication, presence, decisiveness, tact and consistency (Henchey, 2001). As an Indigenous leader, I can also share my cultural perspective on why it is important that we continue to try new strategies, embrace new learning that might benefit our Aboriginal students, and remind the teachers that the education system has failed our students and that we need to be open for change.

Low expectations

Perhaps the saddest aspect of school culture that I initially observed were the seemingly low expectations for students. Low performing schools have been described as “having cultures of low expectations and defeatism” (Duke, Tucker, Salmonowicz & Levy, 2007, p. 13). When I first came into the school in June 2007, the past vice-principal warned me not to expect too much from students in physical education classes. This person shared that she gave up trying to organize games or teach basic skills, and had resorted to basic tag-type games. She gave up because she said the Aboriginal students were “wild” and refused to listen to directions. I was taken aback when I heard her comment – *mmm, where have I heard the term “wild Indians” before?* She was not aware of her racist remark, nor did it seem to matter to her that I was Aboriginal (which she knew I was) and how her words might have impacted me. I started to wonder if a school administrator felt this way about the students, how the teachers must feel every day about teaching their students. I wondered if teachers did not try fun, hands-on

learning activities that engage learners, because students became too excited. This situation became even clearer when I had a conversation with a respected Aboriginal person who knew the school well. He shared that he felt the teachers in my new school had given up on the students. His concern was if the teachers had given up on the students, how then do the students feel about themselves? I began to see the cycle of despair: past administration and present teachers who give up on students, and then students themselves feeling that they are not good enough. Such an environment causes students to give up on school and themselves and to no longer care. I was concerned there was a cycle of learned helplessness and despair permeating my new school.

In discussions with Elders around the province during my leadership years with the BCTF the theme that regularly came up was that educators should keep their expectations high for students. They contended that teachers should not expect any less from an Aboriginal child than what they would from a non-Aboriginal student. This coincided with the culture in which I was raised where school was deemed important and necessary for my future success. My mother had high expectations that I would do well in school and she always encouraged me to do the best I could at school. I have come to understand how some Aboriginal parents do not value education, or to be clearer, the educational *system*. I also understand there may be aversion to formal learning environments by some Aboriginal families, and justifiably so. Because of the history of Indian and Northern Affairs Canada and the Indian Act, Aboriginal parents historically have never had a say in their child's education or their own. I know as a system, we need to ensure that school is relevant, interesting and a place where students *want* to be. I will continue to work with teachers to expect the best from each student

and work with the community to explore ways to engage Aboriginal learners using relevant pedagogy and programs.

Relationship Building

Relationship building is the cornerstone to effective practice and has been a priority in my school community (Condren, Martin & Hutchinson, 2006). I find that the students are much more receptive to me now that I have developed a relationship with them while they are outside, in their classrooms, in clubs, hallways, or when coming into the office. We have built a level of trust and respect, and this is partly based on my core values of being respectful, fair and open with those I meet. The next step is to improve relationships with the parent community. There must be continued dialogue in “developing meaningful, sustainable community involvement [which] includes linkages and partnerships with members and the active seeking of direction from them” (Wiske, 1994, p. 9). I find that the more we invite our parents into the school, the more receptive they are to come. A parent may not be comfortable coming in for a parent-teacher interview, but they may come in for an event that showcases their child.

Before I came to my new school, there had not been a winter concert in nine years. I was surprised because as a parent, I always looked forward to seeing my daughters on stage. I wondered why past administrators did not suggest and promote this previously, but was thrilled when our teaching staff was on board with this suggestion. I shared with staff that having a concert was a wonderful way to invite the community in to see their child in a positive way and could begin to promote a stronger school and community partnership. The staff was hesitant that a concert would draw in the crowds, but with all the staff support the winter concert came to fruition in December of 2007. I

was overcome with emotion when I saw the gym filled to standing room only at the first school concert in almost a decade. Our staff is still excited about having the winter concert three years later. At our last production the staff actually performed a song on stage for the parent community!

A goal I have is to further strengthen community partnerships. It is necessary to include the local Aboriginal Nations on their conceptualization, delivery and application of curricular programs at our school (Ball, 2004), as well as other Aboriginal people from the nations in which the students come from. Unfortunately, at this point it has not occurred at my school. This is important as I take our school towards the model of curricular infusion in the future. As I am a visitor to the First Nations territories in which I work and reside I am respectful of their land, knowledge, and protocols. Respect is particularly important because I am a Mohawk person with a different history and culture (Adalbjarnardottir & Runarsdottir, 2006). Working alongside the Aboriginal communities to develop programs and curriculum is important, but a difficult task to achieve due to the lack of support, resources, or budget from the district level.

Aboriginality and Leading for Change

How I lead and relate to others is based on my world view, and I understand that mine is different from others. My world view stems more from the dominant culture than it does from my Kahníakehake People. It was pointed out to me in a conversation that I come from three worlds, which implies three different cultures: my Aboriginal culture, my White culture, and my own culture that I have developed through life experiences (J. Thom, personal communication, December 2005). Henze and Vanett (1993) share this sentiment and state that the third world is a “world that is not just a

transitional stage, but one that has a culture, language and life of its own” (p. 125). Gipp adds that “the bicultural world that has been developed for Native people is often contradictory in its ideals, values, and customs” (2003, p. 2).

Partly because of the residential school effects we see some families not responsive to schools and feel that their child will lose their culture if they come to school. In my life I learned the customs, culture, and traditions from my mother at home and through the Aboriginal community. I also learned about the dominant culture through the school system, peers, and media. A school should work with the local Aboriginal community to teach Aboriginal language and transmit culture to students. Ultimately it is the parent and community responsibility to carry forth the knowledge to prevent the extinction of a traditional way of life (Washington, 2004), and teachers can teach to the histories, science, technology and arts that Aboriginal peoples have contributed to Canadian society. Unfortunately, much mandated Aboriginal curriculum is still not being taught in schools, due to many non-Aboriginal teachers feeling inadequate, unskilled or burdened to do so. Teacher union contracts within the organization allow teachers the autonomy over their pedagogy. This makes it difficult to assert my desire for teachers to instruct in a more engaging way that addresses and promotes Aboriginal students’ worldviews. I also understand that teaching in a more didactic way may be done in order to have more control over the classroom setting, but more kinesthetic, or problem-based modes of teaching can help to tap into students’ multiple intelligences.

Wakshul suggests that Aboriginal leaders can only truly lead if they know their own community values and history “as well as the Euro-American history, because they

must function in both societies” (as cited in McLeod, 2007, p. 1). I struggle with this because I know about Aboriginal histories generally, but I do not know much about my Mohawk history specifically. I live far away from my reserve, and to fully come to know my past history, I would need to visit or move there for a length of time to become immersed in the culture. Learning through a book is not the same as living and experiencing it. I know that some of my Mom’s best memories are when she lived at home on the reserve, and she told me many times that she wished I could have had the same experience.

What aspects of my Aboriginal culture did get shared with me by my mother? I do not know my traditional language, cannot drum or sing (very well), and I do not know how to make baskets or pottery. However, my mother did take me to the pow-wows every summer and made the best bannock ever. My Mom made delicious venison stew and taught me about the Creator. I learned about the significance of smudging. My mother taught me ways of knowing that could never be found in a book. Perhaps the most important cultural teaching she gave me was in giving back to my people in selfless ways. However, there are things that she did not teach me – she did not teach me about what it means to be discriminated against by both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people, nor did she have to teach me how some people will despise you, just because they know you are Aboriginal. These are things you learn on your own through life experiences. As I am unable to live back on the Six Nations territory, it is important to learn about the traditional territories in which my students reside. This is the way that I can bridge understanding between the students, community and the educators at school.

My Mom was not here to inform me that as the token Aboriginal principal in the school district I would be asked to research, plan and implement Aboriginal workshops in addition to my busy day schedule. These extra tasks make it difficult to find balance between work and home. However, I find the time to do it, even though I may spend evenings and weekends planning. The high expectations I have on myself do not allow me to ignore a request for others to learn. No matter how busy my life has been, I have felt that I needed to be the “Amazing Aboriginal Administrator” who was smart, tireless, and available for all tasks Aboriginal. On the other hand, I do not want to say no, because I am aware and have been taught that I have a gift to offer, and I know that I am a rare commodity. I learned from my mother to always give back and share your voice when called upon. My mother also found it difficult to say no – she took in foster kids, worked 14 hour days, and was always on a mission to save somebody. Did I grow up on the reserve? No, unfortunately I did not get to experience what my mother did. But should it matter? I, like many Aboriginal people, have learned a life of hard lessons, grew up in poverty, overcame barriers, witnessed and experienced racism and abuse first-hand. All of this has helped me to be the person and the leader I am today.

The examination of literature regarding transformational theory, school culture and leading for change as an Aboriginal leader has been the primary focus of this first section of my literature review. The main objective of my research is to offer a highly personal and thoughtful account of my leadership and educational experiences as a Mohawk administrator, woman, and mother. The theoretical concepts of leadership permeate all facets of my life, along with the experiences and cultural teachings of my mother. Being born a female and being molded by my mother to be a leader has been

critical in the current roles I play in life. Blood or Indigenous memory has assisted me to connect with my teachings and that of being a leader from a proud history of female leaders within traditional Mohawk culture (Jacobs & Witt, 2006). My informal leadership within the schools has developed to the formal role of a transformational school principal. These areas of leadership theory provide the framework for this qualitative form of inquiry as it relates to autoethnography and view of self. Further, this study would not be complete without an exploration of identity and what that means to me as an Aboriginal female leader working in a male dominated institution. This next literature review will explore aspects of identity theory and how this impacts my leadership and role as an Indigenous woman operating within a colonialist society.

Part 2: Review of Literature – Identity

Identity

I recall a conversation that I had with members of my graduate committee, where the issue of identity was raised. I recall thinking *what the heck does identity have to do with my role as a principal?* I soon learned that it has everything to do with me being an Aboriginal woman who happens to be in a leadership position. Defining identity is not an easy task, particularly if you are of mixed-blood. I personally do not refer to myself as “mixed-blood” but societal labels do. Being of mixed-blood carries many implications as an Aboriginal person who is defined as such by the Indian Act of Canada. This section of my review will explore the definitions of identity generally from a legal and colonial perspective, and in particular, how legislation has affected Aboriginal women. The perceptions of identity from mainstream society and by other

Aboriginal peoples will allow the readers to share what I have experienced as a mixed-blood person.

Identity through a Colonial Lens

I have never particularly liked the word “Indian.” However, it is a term that the federal government has used for Aboriginal peoples since colonization. Weaver (2001) suggests that “identity is always based on power and exclusion. Someone must be excluded from a particular identity in order for it to be meaningful” (¶ 18). Lawrence suggests that categorizing all Aboriginal peoples in one term – *Indian* – is “synonymous with having our Indigenous Nations dismembered” (2004, p. 37). It is not uncommon to hear people refer to the 615 or so tribes (bands) in Canada and the unique Aboriginal peoples who live within them all referred to as *Indians* as if they were one. Bird (1999) contends, “Because colonizers regarded Indigenous Peoples as inferior, they felt justified in ignoring individual tribal identities and labeling Indigenous Peoples as one racial group: Indians. To the colonizer this made sense because it was economical, efficient, and required little thinking” (¶ 5).

The office of Indian and Northern Affairs Canada was first developed due to military needs. In the 1750s there were many First Nations settlements, and the federal government looked for First Nations men to help serve as allies in the military (Gilbert, 1996). Although the government needed First Nations men to be a part of fighting in both World Wars, these men became enfranchised for serving in the armed forces. Indians could also be enfranchised for acquiring an education or leaving their reserves for employment. In 1860 the control of Indian Affairs was passed to the colonies. In 1876 the Indian Act was passed and became the most sexist and racist legislation yet. At

this point the “process of statutory female subjugation was intensified as new regulations were passed which discriminately undermined the traditional roles, authorities, and autonomy of Aboriginal regulations that directly affected Aboriginal women” (McGrath & Stevenson, 1996, p. 40). The Department of Indian Affairs was created in 1880, and it was a time when Indian Agents became “an important if not the most influential element of Indian Affairs” (Gilbert, 1996, p. 12). These are the same Indian Agents who came to the reserves, including my mother’s, to kidnap children to take them to residential school. Since 1880, the federal government passed legislation determining who was defined as an Indian in the eyes of the law (Lawrence, 2004). This legislation governed who had access to land, and who did and did not have certain rights and privileges. Aboriginal females received very poor treatment since colonization and to this day, lack many of the benefits that have been bestowed on men.

In some traditional Aboriginal societies, the women played a central role within their family, tribes, ceremonies and local government and were as vital in their communities as the men were. The women’s traditional roles included domestic duties and were responsible for the early socialization of their children. In Mohawk society, the women were honored for their vision and wisdom. Aboriginal teachings were passed on to children through oral tradition, and through the generations. Traditionally women and men were equal, and the women were valued as both life-givers and the caretakers of life. It was not until the Europeans arrived that Aboriginal women were considered inferior to men.

In 1869, the Gradual Enfranchisement Act (GEA) was passed and began the sexist process of eroding the rights from Aboriginal women. For 116 years (from 1869-

1985), if an Aboriginal woman married a man who was not Aboriginal, she would become enfranchised and lose her status as an Indian person in Canada (Gilbert, 1996). In essence, she was no longer considered Indian. Aboriginal women in eastern Canada were powerful forces in their tribes, and having them lose their rights meant that they lost their voices when it came to land claims and development, as well as health and dental benefits, medical care, and detribalization. Traditional lineage systems that followed the matrilineal line were replaced by patriarchal lineage due to the GEA (McGrath & Stevenson, 1996). Over 25,000 women lost their Indian status from 1869-1985 (Gilbert, 1996). My mother was one of those women who lost their status when she married my Norwegian father in 1960. Part of the argument was that Aboriginal people and the settler government did not want non-Aboriginal men living on reserve land. By reneging women's band membership, it prevented her or her children from living on the reserve, having language, cultural and family ties and participating in tribal politics.

In European society, the men were considered women's social, legal and political lords. The GEA was based on a patriarchal colonial system where children born were the property of their fathers. Therefore, if an Aboriginal woman married a White man, her children were not considered Indian. However, if an Aboriginal man married a White woman, his children became Indian. Such is what occurred when my Mom married my dad, and my uncle married his British wife. My uncle's wife was allowed to live on the reserve, as she had *become* an Indian through marriage. The government was not threatened by having a non-Aboriginal woman live on the reserve, as they did not hold the same power of many of the female-led clan mothers. White women did not

provide cultural teachings to the children, and this was welcomed by the government.

My uncle's children became Indian, and my mother's children were not. This changed in 1985 when Bill C-31 was passed in the legislature.

Gilbert (1996) explains the changes with Bill C-31 in the chart below:

Pre-April 17, 1985 (Bill C-31)	Brother (generation 1) His status is Indian	Sister (generation 1) Her status is Indian
Marries a non-Indian	His status remains Indian His wife gains Indian status	Her status changes to non-Indian
A child is born	The child is an Indian (generation 2)	The child is a non-Indian (generation 2)
Post-Bill C-31	The child is an Indian man or woman (generation 2), registered under Section 6(1)	The child is an Indian man or woman (generation 2), registered under Section 6(2)
Grandchild is born	The grandchild (generation 3) is entitled under Section 6(1) or Section 6(2)	The grandchild is a non-Indian

Bill C-31 came about by Sandra Lovelace who argued in court that Section 12 (I)(B) of the Indian Act violated her rights to belong to a minority group and to enjoy her culture, practice religion and speak her language in her community. Lovelace was banned from living in her community because she had married a non-Aboriginal man and lost band membership. It was not until the United Nations looked at the case in 1981 and determined that Lovelace's rights were being violated. The Canadian government was likely embarrassed and in June 1985 passed Bill C-31, An Act to Amend the Indian Act (Lawrence, 2004). Bill C-31 has its flaws as shown by the chart above. It means that as Debra's daughter, I had to be reinstated under section 6(2), and my children were not eligible for status rights. My uncle's grandchildren, however, have already enjoyed that right since they were born. Applying to Indian and Northern Affairs on four occasions for Indian status rights for my children did not offer any results, but I am sure that they

were at least annoyed at my many feeble attempts to change the system. Currently, the government is debating Bill C-3 which will allow my daughters and Debra's grandchildren status rights that were denied simply because my mother was female. At some point, however, status Indians, as it reads in the law, will no longer be recognized by the Canadian government, due to the limitations placed in the Act. This will mean that current rights and privileges will be gone and Indians phased out of the Canadian constitution. It would seem that what deputy minister of Indian Affairs, Duncan Campbell Scott wrote in 1920 could prevail:

I want to get rid of the Indian problem....After one hundred years of being in close contact with civilization it is enervating to the individual or to a band to continue in that state of tutelage, when he or they are able to take their positions as British citizens or Canadian citizens, to support themselves and stand alone. That has been the whole purpose of Indian education and advancement since the earliest times....Our object is to continue until there is not a single Indian in Canada that has not been absorbed into the body politic, and there is no Indian question, and no Indian Department (as quoted in Lawrence, 2004, p.32).

Because I am a status Indian in the eyes of the government, I do enjoy certain rights and privileges. My mother was very relieved to receive her status in 1986, and I followed in 1988. The process took a long time, and then required asking for band membership. I recall that my Mom was anxious about applying for band membership, as she felt that she had been away for so long – maybe they would deny her? Fortunately, they accepted her and her four children, and we all have Indian status rights. Once my mother received her status, she shared with me to “*always be proud of being an Indian,*

or Aboriginal, or Native, or Indigenous – whatever the flavor of the day is, (the politically correct term) and use it to your advantage.”

Identity through Others

Usually the term “other” refers to *me* – an Aboriginal person, but in this case, I consider everyone who is not Aboriginal to be the “other.” That is because me and fellow Aboriginal people have been labeled, stereotyped, categorized and examined for our identity since the colonists first invaded First Nations homeland. It makes sense for the Eurocentric government to place labels on Indians so that they can be controlled, manipulated or appeased. It becomes even more complicated when you are of mixed-blood. Deloria suggests that:

We construct identity by finding ourselves in relation to an array of people and objects who are not ourselves. Every person and thing is other to us. We situate some others quite closely to the Selves we are calling into being; others we place so far away as to make them utterly inhuman (1998, p. 29).

I know who I am as a person, but it seems that I often get questioned about my authenticity as a Mohawk person by both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people. This occurs both at a personal and professional level. I do not question other people’s ancestral background, yet others seem entitled to know my lineage like I am a horse or a dog. I sometimes need to prove my identity; however I do not see others pulling out their cards to prove they have a certain quantum-of-blood-as-determined-by-the-government. I do not make you prove that you are British, Scottish, or French for that matter. If you tell me that you are German, I do not ask if you speak your language. If you are Scottish, I do not presume that you wear a kilt. As Aboriginal people, we face

these types of questions all the time. In addition, “Both the external question of authenticity and the internal question [of] identity are significant issues that arise as a consequence of colonialism (Monture-Agnes, 1999, p. 25).

One can start to question their own identity when they continue to be asked for proof or validation of who they are as a person. My auntie recently shared a story with me about when she was applying to rent an apartment. The landlord (who happened to be Asian) looked my aunt over and asked what her nationality was. What does this have to do with renting an apartment? My auntie responded by saying “Canadian.” She decided right then and there to withdraw her application as she had no interest in renting an apartment from a bigot. As Aboriginal people, whether you are full-blooded or not, we get questions that very few other minority groups get asked. Perhaps we need to say it is none of their business, so that others can be aware that we have a right to be who we are without having to prove our identity.

Identity as a mixed-blood Aboriginal person is complicated because others, particularly non-Aboriginal people, try to determine and have expectations of whom and what you are (LaRocque, 2010). As an Aboriginal person I am expected to walk in ‘two worlds’, yet non-Aboriginal people do not need, want or have to (Henze & Vanett, 1993). It is also assumed that identity is fixed, yet it is not. Weaver adds that “identities are always fragmented, multiply constructed, and intersected in a constantly changing, sometimes conflicting array” (2001, ¶ 3). There are many definitions of identity. Gardner et al. describes two aspects of identity: self-identification and social identity (2005). Self-identification is the process of “fixing and expressing one’s own identity, privately through reflection about oneself and publicly through self-disclosures” and

social identity which is “based upon the extent to which one sees oneself as being a member of certain social groups, as well as one’s assessment of the emotional and value significance of this membership” (Gardner et al., ¶ 4). This is similar to Richardson’s concept of symbolic interactionism which is a philosophy based on the individual self (“I” and “me”) being created through interaction with the larger society (2005). Berry (1999) suggests that cultural identity is closely attached to self-concept and implies a sense of attachment in relation to Aboriginal peoples.

Cultural identity changes and progresses over time leading to a new sense of self or a rediscovered sense of what it means to be Aboriginal (Weaver, 2001, ¶ 19). When I was younger I was much less interested in my cultural background than I am now. As a young child I entered school choosing not to share that I was a Mohawk person. I was fair-skinned and looked and related to all of the other children in class. In all of my elementary school years I do not ever recall a student who was not fair-skinned. I began my school life as a bicultural person – being White in school and practicing my Mohawk culture at home and in the community only. For me, my cultural identity was never questioned by me, only by others. I knew I was Mohawk *inside* whether I chose to share it or not.

The questioning by others is what I find difficult to grasp – why is it so important for others to categorize me as an Aboriginal person? I find this of particular interest now that I am in the role of a principal of a predominantly Aboriginal population. These questions were virtually non-existent as a classroom teacher, or in other schools with few Aboriginal students. Perhaps the questioning of my identity is what has made my present job assignment so difficult. It is not just coming to a

challenging inner-city school as a neophyte; it is also coming to a school with an Aboriginal community and staff who sometimes question who I am as an Aboriginal person, which in turn has made me question who I am. This position has unexpectedly challenged me in personal and spiritual ways as well as professionally.

Identity and Stereotyping

I recall when my niece and nephew were moving to a large urban city after living on the reserve for all of their lives. I asked my nephew if he was nervous, and he said that he was excited. I asked my sister if she was concerned about racism once she moved to the city as her children had always been around predominantly First Nations people. Aboriginal people who have grown up in their traditional communities often experience racism, prejudice and discrimination once they move into urban settings and are immersed in the dominant society (Berry, 1999). She said that she had not really thought about it. I then asked my nephew again, “Are you proud of being Aboriginal? Cree/Mohawk? Are you looking forward to sharing that with your new classmates?” He replied, “What’s an Aboriginal?” I then used other words like *Indian* and *Native*, all the while with him staring at me with a confused look. You see, living on reserve for him was the norm, seeing brown-skinned or fair-skinned Aboriginal people was the norm – there was not any talk about blood quotas or racism, everyone just got along because everyone knew each other and they were a community. I hoped that my niece and nephew would never have to be a target of racist remarks, and so far they have not been. Why? Because my sister is of mixed-blood, and therefore her children are fair-skinned. With the exception of her Cree husband, the children and my sister can pass as White folk in the city if they choose.

Kids are interesting, and you can learn a lot from them. As a classroom teacher, I taught from kindergarten to grade seven for 12 years. For many of my teaching years, I taught a unit on stereotyping and racism. Depending on the student's ages we would either talk about how wolves and bears are stereotyped, or how some people are treated in society. Something happens to children's mindsets between about grade three and grade four. In kindergarten to grade three, kids generally love everybody – all nationalities, boys, girls, plump, or skinny. They accept you for who you are. After around grade four, something changes. Societal influences from home, the media, family members, and books play a huge part in how children come to view the world. Children start to negatively stereotype people without sometimes ever knowing why or how it came to be. As educators, we can make a positive change for children by helping them to recognize their stereotypes as being inaccurate and damaging.

I will never forget a particular lesson I taught to my grade six class many years ago. It was about part way through the school year, so we had built a safe respectful classroom. My students knew that I was Mohawk and loved turtles – for Christmas that year they gifted me turtle earrings, turtle knick-knacks and they knew I was proud of my heritage. I was eager to start my unit on stereotyping. I decided to put a “twist” on the usual lesson. I had the students put their heads down. As I came by I would tap them lightly on the shoulder and have them look at a picture I was holding up. Their task was to say the first thing that popped into their head once they looked at the picture. I reminded them that it was a safe place to share and that they should be honest. I began going around the room. Some of the words that the 11 and 12 year old students said were words like “scary, crack-head, dirty, yuck, creepy, Whoa!, and Yikes!” I allowed

the students to share amongst themselves after everyone had seen the photograph. What was the photograph? It was a picture of my (brown-skinned) brother. When I told my students who it was – they were taken aback. They wanted to know how he could be my brother, and the confusion and realization of what they had said about him set in. The apologies were spewing out faster than I could respond, and one girl started to cry because she felt badly for what she said. It was a moving lesson that promoted much dialogue and insight. I asked my students to tell me what they knew or heard about Aboriginal people, and when they shared the many negative stereotypes, they wanted to assure me that they were not referring to *me*. I told them, “But I *am* an Aboriginal person. Do I come to school drunk? Am I dirty? Am I on drugs? Am I lazy?” Those were all the terms that my students used to describe Aboriginal people, and they were only in grade six. It was a good lesson and one that was spoken about for weeks to come. Some of my student’s parents came in to talk to me about the positive impact the lesson had on their child. When we can have young students become aware of their mindsets and how their thinking can affect their views on people, it is a good first step. As teachers we want to be able to educate young minds and enable them to be culturally astute and accepting of others that are seemingly different (Coughlin, 2003).

Identity is not fixed, however being Aboriginal means that there are often neat, descriptive pockets of categorization that are imposed upon us by society. You are either this or that when it comes to labeling. You are *either* the noble *or* the savage Indian, *either* the traditional, bicultural *or* assimilated Indian, *either* the real *or* wannabe Indian. If you are the noble Indian, you are proud, strong, speak little, know your language and live on the land. If you are the savage Indian, you are the drunkard, the fighter, the

militant, the homeless and the poverty-stricken Indian. If you are traditional, you practice and share your culture, you live or have lived on the reserve, and you are spiritual. If you are bicultural, you have learned to “walk in both worlds.” If you are assimilated, you are considered an “apple” – red on the outside, but White on the inside. You have also shunned your Indianness and taken on the dominant culture’s viewpoints, mannerisms, and lifestyle. If you are assimilated, you value education and work hard to get a good job. If you are a real Indian, you are valued in society by both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people. In addition, St Denis (2004) states:

Authentic cultural Aboriginal identity has become high currency. Some of the markers of cultural authenticity include speaking one’s Aboriginal language, having knowledge of and participating in a myriad of spiritual practices, and having knowledge of traditional stories and other practices of the past (p. 37).

If you just discovered last week that you have an Indian grandma, you might be considered a wannabe or a fake. These are not *my* opinions, but opinions of some people in society and those in the education field, who feel they have the right to label and judge Aboriginal people. This can have devastating effects when Aboriginal people are seeking employment in the educational field. People who are in hiring positions (Aboriginal or not) who ask Aboriginal candidates about their cultural knowledge or background, or whether they “attend pow-wows” are perpetuating systemic racism. Attendance of cultural events or knowing your language will not necessarily determine how a person would relate to an Aboriginal student. Other factors such as a willingness to learn, listen and collaborate, showing empathy, being curious and caring will go a long way to building relationships with Indigenous students.

There are disadvantages to being a brown-skinned Aboriginal person in Canada, both in the past and today. Just ask my auntie or my Mom when they were trying to rent housing as an Aboriginal single mother. The stereotypes are defeating for Aboriginal people who often are shown disdain the moment other people lay eyes on them. Stereotypes prevent Aboriginal people from gaining employment, and from being treated fairly in the justice system. I am fair-skinned and obviously inherited certain genes from my father. My mother, youngest sister and older brother are darker-skinned and have faced much more racism in their lives than I have. My siblings look full-blood, yet they are of mixed-blood as well. They face racism on a day-to-day basis, whereas I have enjoyed White privileges. I do not have to worry about securing employment, getting good service in a restaurant, renting housing or getting negative looks from others. I do not have to worry that my lifestyle will be scrutinized or home life analyzed because, unless I choose to, I do not have to state that I am Aboriginal. I can simply go about my business and be treated with respect from non-Aboriginal folk because of my fair skin.

American Peggy McIntosh (1990) names twenty-five conditions that she, as a White person, can describe that gives her “privilege” over African American people. Things such as turning on a television and seeing her race widely represented or knowing that her children’s school curricular materials are relevant to them, or not being asked to speak for all people in her racial group. One might argue that many African-American people are more highly regarded in our society than Canadian Aboriginal people, and so White privilege is prevalent in our country as well. Is it coincidence that my two darker-skinned siblings have faced challenges, including violence, much more

than their fair-skinned sibling? I believe that they have had difficult lives due to racism, prejudice and stereotyping that is directed towards phenotypically-visible Aboriginal people.

Identity through Aboriginal Eyes

“Not fitting a stereotype carries its own kind of burden, but being invisible carries its own kind of pain” (Merskin, 1996, p. 283). Years ago I was invited to a special celebratory dinner with other First Nations community members. I engaged in a rich discussion with a First Nations person who was from the community that I was a guest in. I was feeling optimistic that I was making a good impression as the school’s new principal. The conversation was lively until this person asked me if I spoke my language. I immediately felt embarrassed and defensive. I stammered out something like, *No, I wish I did....* Well, then I wish I did not answer so quickly as this well respected member of the Nation immediately turned around (we were in a line-up), and the conversation came to an abrupt end. It seemed to me that the interest ended because I shared that I lacked my traditional language. Did this person cease the conversation because of my lack of language acquisition? I am unsure but I can say at that critical moment I was made to feel invisible by this person. I felt like an outsider and very much out of place and my comfort zone. I need to work on not being defensive and wish that I could let things roll off my back like my mother suggested I do. She taught me to be respectful and listen well, and so that is what I did the rest of the evening. I suppose I just wanted to fit in with the Aboriginal community and feel like I have a “home.” The words and actions of my new Aboriginal community meant a lot to me. I know it is not my fault or my mother’s that her language was lost, or should I say....stolen. It seemed

that my admittance to not knowing my language was the “deal breaker” for that person on my first visit to the reserve. I realize now how important it is to build relationships and trust in an Aboriginal community. I have since had many conversations with this person and today we get along well and have a respectful relationship. At that time early on in my new school I was experiencing self-doubt, was feeling quite apprehensive and nervous about making a good impression. I needed to refer back to my mother’s teachings of being a responsive listener so that I could learn more about the community I was about to become immersed in.

A byproduct of colonization is internalized oppression, or lateral racism. Lateral racism is one of the many devastating impacts of the legacy of residential schools and can be spirit breaking for Aboriginal people who have been subject to its many forms. Colonialism has turned to blood quantum, lineage, and questions of culture to determine who is Indian in the eyes of a hegemonic society. It is only through the colonizers that Aboriginal people have felt the need to question their identity. Claiming an Aboriginal identity only to be told by another Aboriginal person that you are not a “real” Indian can be a tough pill to swallow. I have always been taught to be proud of my Mohawk background, and have been blessed to have been raised by a mother who cared to show her children what she could about our cultural history and traditions. My mother left the reserve at 14 and raised us off reserve, and she did her best to teach us what she remembered and knew instinctively by being raised on the farm in her reserve. Perhaps one of the hardest things I initially faced at my school was feeling that I was suddenly not “Indian” enough.

Aboriginal people “fight among [them] selves and often accuse each of not being ‘Indian enough’ based on differences in politics, religion, or phenotype” (Weaver, 2001, ¶ 41). Historical and societal influences have assisted Aboriginal people in feeling they need to question the validity of ones’ Aboriginality (St. Denis, 2004). Fortunately, I have a strong network of Aboriginal people in my life who are witness to who I am as a person. My auntie in Toronto is my guiding force who has taken on the role as my cultural mentor now that my Mom is gone. Through blood memory, I continue to learn who I am every day. It is important for Aboriginal people of mixed-blood to have a support system in place so that they have friendly ears that can listen and help to validate who they are (Berry, 1999).

Identity is complicated, ever-changing, and can take a lot of soul searching when you are facing who you are as a Mohawk person. I have come from being a child who hid her identity to an adult who is proud to share my Mohawkness. Working in a school with many Aboriginal students, parents and staff members forces me to be aware of my identity on a daily basis. It has been difficult being forced to look deep inside at who I am as a Mohawk woman, as this was not what I had anticipated when I aspired to be a school principal. It is unlikely that my employers were aware of the difficulty I would face being a principal with Mohawk ancestry in a school that has a different set of First Nations culture and beliefs. Identity issues have intermingled with being a neophyte and it has been an interesting learning journey for me professionally, spiritually, and academically. I have appreciated and learned from every significant experience so far in my school, and it is transformative and humbling.

Chapter III

Research Methodology

This study will invite readers to walk beside me as I recount experiences and memories of my childhood growing up in poverty, school years, days of early motherhood, career choices and leadership roles. The stories are meant to provide the reader with an opportunity to join me as I explore deeper issues that are at the core of my feelings, reactions, and decisions. Each upcoming chapter will share stories that have developed from an analysis of the cultural, historical, political, social or institutional systems that provoke reflection and cogitation. The methodology of utilizing an autoethnographic model permits me, in essence, to write my life story. It allows me to question myself, look at the broader picture, and analyze and reflect on my life, my mother's life and how societal factors and colonialism have played a significant role.

Purpose of the Study

It is through narrative inquiry, specifically through the use of an autoethnographical approach, and using my own lived experience that I will gain a better understanding of who I am as an Aboriginal leader and how I can transform to be a better leader in the future. Quinney (1996) warns that writing an autoethnography "...will encompass your emotional and spiritual life, your very being. This is ethnography as the lived experience of the ethnographer" (p. 357). I am prepared for this challenging work, as I want my stories to enable readers to experience synergy when reading, and ultimately grasp what they need to from the experience (Archibald, 2008; Ellis & Bochner, 1996). Doll suggests the work is reciprocal as "the narrative mode

requires interpretation. A good story, a great story, induces, encourages, challenges the reader to interpret, to enter into dialogue with the text” (1993, p. 169).

The purpose of this study is to share with readers the complexity of my life experiences as a mixed-blood Mohawk woman in leadership, while at the same time exposing my inner most thoughts and feelings. A reader who is expecting a “pleasurable experience” may be disappointed with reading my autoethnography due to some of the explicit authentic stories (Ellis & Bochner, 1996, p. 23). The reader is welcome to take what they want from reading of the experiences that two Mohawk women have faced while taking on leadership roles in a colonial based society.

My hope is for a better understanding and acceptance that Aboriginal Peoples have stories to share that are valid, meaningful, and equal to other voices. As a female working in a male dominated organization, this story shares my lived experience of being an Indigenous principal in a school with Aboriginal students and a community who deserve more from an educational system that embraces status quo. An ongoing struggle of Indigenous people against colonization is to be able to represent ourselves and to speak in the mainstream society with our own voices and words (Abu-Saad, 2008; Tuhiwai Smith, 1999). Writing using an autoethnographical approach allows a “social space where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power, such as colonialism” (Ellis & Bochner, 1996, p. 189). It is time that the “Other” in the eyes of the colonizer, is heard.

Methodology

I have been keeping a journal since I learned to write as a child. These journals along with my mothers' journals, photographs, unfinished autobiography, field notes and reflective journals, became the methods of data collection and review. I followed the format of Spradley for ethnographic data collection (1979). Field notes were taken that were in the form of single words, sentences, phrases, or paragraphs, depending on the time and context of where the signifying event occurred. These field notes were then transferred into my reflective journal. On the left side of the page, the factual event or experience was recorded in as much detail as time permitted. Following the event as it occurred were the immediate feelings, emotions and any visceral reactions that were experienced. The right side of the page was for reflection and an analysis of the event. The guided reflection process entails playing the experience in your mind, attending to the feelings it conjures up, re-evaluating the experience and then drawing lessons from it (Shamir & Eilam, 2005). Sometimes it took hours, days, weeks, or through dreams, to understand the lessons I was ultimately meant to learn. I continue to have experiences that I question when the lesson will be revealed. Boyd and Fales (1983) maintain that "reflective learning is the process of internally examining and exploring an issue of concern, triggered by an experience, which creates and clarifies meaning in terms of self, and which results in a changed conceptual perspective" (p. 99). Sometimes lessons take their time, and with me, may come in my dreams or at the moments just before I drift off to sleep. At times I also had to consciously stop myself from being critical and self-judging because I didn't know or do better and I learned to be patient for the teachings to manifest themselves.

On a recent summer trip to Winnipeg and Toronto, I took photos of homes I grew up in, visited schools, and many of the places that my mother worked when I was a child. I also toured and took pictures of the residential school in Brantford, Ontario that many of Debra's siblings attended from 1956 – 1962. This school is called the Mohawk Institute, and referred to by some Survivors as the "Mush hole." From the data collection and analysis, many themes developed which became the basis for the upcoming chapters of my story.

History of Autoethnography

Autoethnography has been used by literary critics, sociologists and anthropologists for over twenty years (Burdell & Swadener, 1999). There is also an emerging genre in educational scholarship which suggests a movement away from "distanced theoretical writing to writing that details the individual and imaginative aspects of agency" (Pepper & Hamilton Thomas, 2002, p. 159). Roth explains that auto/ethnography is popular in other domains, but has yet to be fully explored in the field of education (2005). Roth continues by suggesting that auto/ethnography is ethnography mixed with the exploration of one's own culture. Furthermore, autoethnography is closely related to ethnography in that it involves a study of a particular group of people who share experiences and values (Pepper & Hamilton Thomas, 2002). "...Auto/ethnography reveals concretely realized patterns in one's own actions rather than the actions of others" (Roth, 2005, p. 3). Van Maanen, Dabbs and Faulkner suggest that "it is also the case that within the past decade, qualitative research, particularly fieldwork of the ethnographic variety – has become a more visible and identifiable methodology within the social sciences" (1982, p. 13). Carolyn Ellis (1999)

elaborates that in autoethnographical writing “the writer addresses herself or himself (‘auto’), as a subject of a larger social or cultural inquiry (‘ethno’), vis-à-vis evocative and revealing writing (‘graphy’)” (as cited in Noy, 2005, p. 360). Pereira, Settelmaier and Taylor (2005) sum up why autoethnography fits well as a mode of research:

By understanding deeply how historical, social and cultural forces are shaping their lives, educators may come to view their established professional practices with a fresh eye, feeling empowered to initiate transformative change such as democratizing institutional decision-making or creating learning environments in which flourish higher-level modes of thinking and feeling (p. 50).

To put it simply, autoethnography is presumed to be an authentic way for someone to tell what happened to her, from her own point of view (Eisenhart, 2005).

Current popular researchers, Jean Clandinin, Michael Connelly (2000) and Carolyn Ellis (2004) credit John Dewey as the philosopher who influenced their study of lived experience and storytelling methodology respectively. Dewey suggests that the connection between education and personal experience is determined by the quality of the experience, and that all knowledge is derived from sense-experience (1938). He suggests that “every experience lives on in further experiences” (1938, p. 27). Adding to this, Palmer proposes that when one reads a piece of work:

...it is an ‘experience,’ a breaking down and breaking open of one’s old way of seeing. It is not the interpreter who has manipulated the work, for the work remains fixed; rather, the work has impressed itself on him and he is so changed he can never regain the innocence lost through experience (1969, p. 249).

Ellis and Bochner (2000) state that there must be “systematic sociological introspection and emotional recall to try and understand an experience [that is] lived through” (p. 737). When a particular experience occurred, time was needed for me to fully understand both why it was such that I needed to record it, and how the experience played on my emotions and allowed me to learn from it. Some experiences were profound and left me pondering the significance of the lesson. My mother’s words would come to me as I asked her to help me understand. I believe in the Creator as my higher power and know that through my mother, I received guidance particularly when I could let things go and focus on the teachings. In all experiences I gave thanks to what I learned and if I acted in a way that was not appropriate I made amends and talked it through with others. I had to learn quickly in my new position as principal that mistakes will be made and understand that it is part of the learning process. It is your moral integrity that determines how you will act upon making a mistake and admittance of such. Acknowledging errors and reflecting are part of authentic leadership, and my experiences allowed me to transform and evolve as a leader. Lived experience is also the starting and end point of the phenomenological research I engaged in (van Manen, 1990).

Autoethnography meshes nicely with phenomenology because it is a matter of identifying what the important matter is and then recognizing this interest as a true phenomenon (van Manen, 1990). Phenomenology urges us “to describe these ‘things’ as they reveal themselves to us through our consciousness” (Ladkin, 2005, p. 111). It is with this in mind that I selectively choose the data that I will use for my study. Those situations that make me angry or that unnerve me, are things that I feel I can learn from.

I also learn from experiences that cause me great joy – special instances that allow me to be mindful and cause reflection. It is not simply everyday ordinary experiences that resonate with me, it is those experiences that really matter to me as a person, and as a leader that will determine how I react, and how I will learn and grow, and change from the experience. As Foltz & Griffin (1996) suggest, “changes may involve completely reconceptualizing a phenomenon and completely revising one’s worldview” (p. 302). I found this to be true in experiences that occurred at my present school. I thought I was an open-minded person and realized very quickly that I had a lot to learn from my school and Aboriginal community.

Merleau-Ponty stressed how important our bodies are when engaged with ‘things’ (1962). This is true for me when I become rattled by words or situations that affect my values or beliefs as an Aboriginal person. I listen to my body when I am experiencing an unpleasant conversation and understand how my whole being becomes involved in those important life events that can alter my perceptions. I have come to be in tune with my body and almost immediately feel when I am becoming upset. For me the feeling begins in my upper chest with a tightening sensation. This follows by my heart quickening and beating so loudly that it feels like it is going to come right out of my ribcage. That is my cue to breathe deeply and not react or speak. It is a time that is best spent in silence as I begin to focus more closely on the visceral reaction and my environment simultaneously.

The lessons from my mother sometimes manifest as I begin to deeply listen to what is being said, get my breathing back to normal, and consider what I might say (or not say) in response. Waterhouse (2002) points out that “significant learning experiences

do not happen simply from the neck up. Learning is as much about the heart, the gut, the body as it is about the brain” (p. 4).

One of the key aspects of phenomenological epistemology is “the importance of ‘doing’ as a basis for knowing” (Ladkin, 2005, p. 115). In order for me to truly know I need to be actively engaged with the phenomena. Sometimes this can be difficult and I need to ask myself why I feel this way. I will not come to understand, learn, or grow from the situation if I do not actively engage in conversation and explore *why* I feel the way I do and *how* I have come to feel this way. I need to make meaning of the experience, and to do this I must force myself to be actively engaged in the matter. Sometimes it is dealing with the most unsettling of matters that make you think and grow the most. In writing an autoethnography, I need to visit the phenomenon again and again until new information and insights are revealed to me.

When I travelled around British Columbia delivering workshops on Aboriginal education, I had researched the history of Aboriginal students and parents and their experience with formal education. It angered me that much of the pedagogy has not changed much since industrialization. I then read articles about improving Aboriginal achievement and learned ways to involve parents in the school. I spoke to other Aboriginal educators and read books. I then took this knowledge and developed three hour or full day workshops on the topic. I thought that because I was being referred to as the “expert” that maybe I was (*upon reflection, I was rather cocky in my confidence!*). What I didn’t understand at that time was that I needed to *live* and actually *experience* being in a school with a large number of Aboriginal students and *learn* from the Aboriginal community. I had read that Aboriginal parents were hesitant to come into the

school, so then why was I surprised when the majority of them would wait outside in the rain rather than coming inside at the end of the day? Why was I surprised to observe that the non-Aboriginal teachers were teaching the way they were taught and not offering a different experience for Aboriginal students? Why was I disheartened to learn that status quo was prevalent in my school and that innovative pedagogy was not prevalent even though my clientele needed it to succeed? Phenomenology warranted that I needed to position myself within the phenomenon in order to gain new understanding, not just perceive it from afar.

Additionally, van Manen suggests that “our ‘common sense’ pre-understandings, our suppositions, assumptions, and the existing bodies of scientific knowledge, predispose us to interpret the nature of the phenomenon before we have even come to grips with the significance of the phenomenological question” (1990, p. 46). When I am dealing with situations in school I attempt to put myself in the situation of the other staff member, parent, or student, so that I can better understand where they are coming from. I will never forget the picture and saying that my Mom had displayed while I was growing up, “*Never judge another Indian unless you have walked a mile in his moccasins.*” I have learned that this does work if you can be empathic to others and live by your core values. Fullan suggests that in order for one to change others, you must first change yourself, “as change and growth in ourselves show a commitment to improvement” (1988, p. 161). Using this perspective multidimensionality is the “ability to see issues from one’s own as well as other’s perspective” (Karim, 2003, p. 2). Lastly, feminism has played a role in the use of autoethnography. By female researchers mixing their own personal experiences, making connections with their study via their

knowledge, it progresses autoethnography as a valid research model (Ellis, 2004). It also reflects a ‘feminine way of knowing’ which is an important aspect for women over their male counterparts in educational administration (Sanchez & Thornton, 2010).

Telling the Story

I became a storyteller when I was a teenager. Because we were poor we did not have many books in our house when I was growing up. When I had my first born, the stories she heard were all oral stories, made up by me and my imagination. I knew the importance of reading and books, and was determined to ensure that my daughter was read to, even if the stories were invented. My daughter still recalls anxiously awaiting her bedtime so that mommy would tell her a story about some far off princess. I have been told that my storytelling abilities are a gift. I agree that this is a gift my mother helped give me and can be used as a valuable learning tool for others as they listen to and read my stories.

Utilizing storytelling and sharing of life histories to channel educational messages is a traditional and culturally respectful pedagogical method used by Indigenous People (Antone, 2000; Archibald, 2008; Hodge, Pasqua, Marquez & Geishirt-Cantrell, 2002; Kovach, 2009). I believe that storytelling is an under-valued way of conducting qualitative research in our culture, and yet storytelling comes so naturally for many people. Holt suggests that “qualitative researchers need to be storytellers, and storytelling should be one of their distinguishing attributes” (2003, p. 5). It seems to be the natural fit for my storytelling abilities, my questions of self, and how my Mohawk culture fits in to all of this. An individuals’ sense of self, or identity, can be

understood through stories, and these stories reveal the ways in which “individuals know themselves and their lives” (Drake, Spillane & Hufferd-Ackles, 2001, p. 2).

Mohawk writer Patricia Monture-Angus writes that “it is the teachings of my people that demand we speak from our own personal experience. That is not necessarily knowledge which comes from academic study or from books” (1995, p. 29). This knowledge can then be shared and given back to Aboriginal people or to those who can help to implement organizational change. “The transformative power of stories is reminiscent of the Native belief in *shapeshifting*. In some ways, stories help people to change their form, or identity” (Richardson, 2005, p. 33). I have experienced shapeshifting or transformation through my experience as a school principal, and it is hoped that through the use of my storytelling that others can help to understand who and where they are in their own leadership and identity journey. “Only through an Indigenous approach is it possible to begin to present an Aboriginal perspective and an Aboriginal voice on issues that are central to Aboriginal life” (Friedel, 1999, p. 147).

Stó:lō researcher Jo-ann Archibald coined the term ‘storywork’ when an Aboriginal person chooses to use storytelling for educational purposes. She speaks of the importance of considering seven factors when using stories to convey messages: Respect, Responsibility, Reciprocity, Reverence, Holism, Interrelatedness and Synergy (Archibald, 2008). She suggests that if these principles are used, the story can take on a life of its own. I believe I have been respectful and responsible on how I have chosen to share my stories. Stories were carefully chosen that would not hurt others and were used to inform so others could learn. I have been as accurate as I can in sharing my truth as I know and perceive it. Reciprocity has been utilized by sharing my teachings and giving

back to others who may have a similar interest or who aim to learn more about Aboriginal students in school today. I have shown reverence by being ethical in my writing and not depicted individuals in a manner that is unjust or untrue. My stories are holistic in that they involve not only the mind, but the heart, body and spirit together. The stories are evocative and aim to provide a rich experience for the reader. Archibald states that "...understandings and insights also result from lived experiences and critical reflections on those experiences" (2008, p. 42). I have reflected on my experiences as an Indigenous leader and my readers can learn how I learned and developed from the first reaction to that of new understandings.

To display interrelatedness is to understand ourselves and to know where we have come from, and to have the reader relate to the storyteller. I could not have written my story unless I went back 'home' to Six Nations to revisit and see where my Mom was raised and visit the Mush hole where she lost her siblings. While visiting the Mush hole, I experienced *déjà vu*, which is a part of blood memory. I knew my ancestors had been in that dark, decrepit room in the basement. I knew there were horrors that occurred there because I felt it innately. The moment I walked in I felt a chill, became uncomfortable and began to weep. My auntie held me and told me that I had been there because *she* had been there, and other family members before her. It was a hard moment, and one that I will never forget. Going 'home' to Winnipeg to visit my childhood homes and places where my mother worked was also a trip I needed to do for my spirit and for my healing. Although a very emotional experience, it was one that I needed to do before I could immerse myself in the writing process. Lastly, my stories provide a synergetic interaction between myself and the reader. This synergy can

provide healing and spiritual aspects and bring the story to life (Archibald, 2008). My storytelling provided an outlet for my grief, loss and realization that my Mom's life journey was a difficult one that she travelled mostly alone.

I chose an autoethnography over an autobiography because I wanted to situate my story within a socio-cultural context. It is exciting to put the "self" back in to my writing, as for years in the academic field, stating the "I" was not acceptable. Autoethnography in its many forms allows the reader to imagine and recreate the experience he or she feels from the text. Once a story is told the author no longer owns the story – the story belongs to the reader who will determine its translation and meaning.

Rodriguez (2005) argues that the author of an autoethnography needs to be explicit in what her intentions are so that the reader is better able to engage personally and share "socially transformative dialogue" (p. 119). Rodriguez suggests that intentionality refers to sharing your ideological, theoretical and pedagogical motives behind your aspiration to tell a chosen story of self. Being clear with the readers allows them to be aware of your agenda for writing the story in the first place. This argument would suggest that I share I was raised in poverty, and that is why I have a certain viewpoint when it comes to dealing with students and families in my school. Perhaps the reader might want to know more of my background so they can better understand how and why I have chosen to deal with situations in a certain way. I believe I would also owe it to my reader to share if I had gained new insight from reconstructing aspects of my life that I chose to share with them. Carolyn Ellis (1996) suggests:

Many of our authors are struggling with the dilemma of how to position themselves within their research projects to reveal aspects of their own tacit world, challenge their own assumptions, locate themselves through the eyes of the Other, and observe themselves observing (p. 28).

Some critiques have stated that autoethnographers are self-indulgent, bordering on narcissism (Holt, 2003; Pereira, Settelmaier & Taylor, 2005). The author is put in a position where she must dig deep and bare her soul, so to speak, in many aspects of her life. I choose to do this as a reason to help or empower others. Writing about my lived experiences can help others in their leadership journey. Bicultural educators who are contemplating administration may gain a better understanding of the situations that he or she may be placed in. It will help educators of mixed-blood understand that issues of cultural identity may come up whether you work with Aboriginal staff or not. My experiences have allowed me to self-reflect and understand more fully who I am as a woman of Mohawk ancestry. As a writer I place myself in a vulnerable position by leaving my story open for interpretation by strangers. However, I am willing to do this because I believe that a story like mine needs to be told and others can learn from it. This is one way I can 'give back' which is a cultural teaching of my Mohawk people.

"Validity as an epistemological concept, assumes an absolute, fixed truth which can be measured, validated, and verified" (Munro, 1995). With autoethnography, testing research for its 'validity' may not fit. Rather, the stories that are told should be viewed for how the reader's ways of knowing are enlightened or rejuvenated. Gee suggests that "...humans *construct* their realities, though what is 'out there' beyond human control places serious constraints on this construction" (1999, p. 94). A reader would need to

ask herself if the story is believable or possible. This is how validity would be 'tested' using an autoethnographical approach.

According to Ellis (1997), these are also the standards for generalizability and utility. Readers should ask themselves, "Does the account ring true to those who are in a position to know....and does it seem potentially fruitful for their practice?" (p. 133).

Verisimilitude is the appearance or possibility that something is or could be true or real. This is a more appropriate criterion for an autoethnography than proof of truth (Kramp, 2004). If the stories promote insight and are open to interpretation, then they are deemed to have verisimilitude (Pereira, Settelaar & Taylor, 2005). Holt (2003) and Ellis (2007) suggest that traditional forms of criteria for evaluation do not and should not apply to personal narratives (autoethnography). To summarize, I share my life stories so that others may learn from my experiences.

Research Design and Methods

Asking Aboriginal leaders on how they view their role within the educational system is an overlooked aspect in educational leadership. Consideration of conflicting morals, values, and cultures can impact the decisions that administrators need to make on a day to day basis. Information and perceptions from Aboriginal administrators are scarce in the literature. The researcher as the primary data source allows the reader to gain insight into the life of one Aboriginal leader. The heartfelt stories will share the challenges I face in my line of work and in my daily life. Educators will likely be surprised by many of my stories that have been occurring since I was born. Eileen Antone (2000) noted that "listening to the life stories of Aboriginal speakers' helps

educators become more aware of culturally appropriate education” (p. 97) and also helps them to empathize so there can be a better understanding.

Data Collection

I reviewed the following data before beginning my writing: my mother’s journal, her unfinished autobiography, my journals that have been kept for the past 15 years, photographs (both old and new), newspaper articles from the Six Nations reserve, field notes, reflective journals, personal conversations with family members and colleagues that were then written into my journal, phone calls, and newspaper articles from the library.

Data Analysis

Readers should be aware of the journey that autoethnographers led to get to the point of putting the pen to paper (Rodriguez, 2005). In order for events to make it to paper, it would have had to be a significant moment that either challenged my cultural identity or that of being a leader. It would have been an event that was unsettling or was joyous. Many events have occurred in my time as a principal that never made it to the final stages of writing due to it being inappropriate for my audience or it may have affected others in a negative way. Even though it is a part of *my* story, it needed to be filtered or omitted in order to keep others’ identities or stories safe. Eisenhart suggests that authors would be naïve to think that their stories are “unfiltered or unbiased,” and that readers would not know the difference (2005, p. 286). As I weave my stories in with the theoretical notions of societal influences, I am better placed to understand how the experiences have affected my life. Analyzing the data using an autoethnographical approach means that it is an ongoing event, developing over time. New insights are

gained from past experiences, and rereading reflective journals provides deeper understanding of issues as life progresses. Whenever I could, I shared my intent with the readers so that they could better understand any personal biases that I might have towards the situation or event. Readers of my work might include teachers, support workers, Indigenous leaders, administrators and district level personnel, persons of mixed-blood ancestry, college and university students and professors.

Perhaps the most difficult analysis that I had to process is my reflective journal. I used the reflective journal to look inward at specific events and examine the emotions that came through while writing them. I took note on how I felt physically, where I felt the stress, pain, or joy, and wrote the event down, often while emoting. This process was also described by Ellis and Bochner (2000) as a method referred to as *emotional recall*. van Manen also suggests that “by thoughtfully reflecting on what I should have done, I decide in effect how I want to be. In other words, I infuse my being and readiness to act with a certain thoughtfulness” (1990, p. 228). After taking time to reflect in my journal, I would sometimes change my viewpoint. I might have started off angry when writing, but after some time of reflecting, I came to understand and gain new insights. At times this process could take days or even weeks. When analyzing the data, I would reflect back to my initial research questions to keep me focused:

- 1) What are the expectations that I place on myself as a Mohawk woman working as a principal, and how do these expectations determine how I develop as a leader in the school system?

- 2) How can my Aboriginal cultural teachings, experience, and understanding be developed and further enhanced while working in a colonialist bureaucratic organization based on status quo norms?
- 3) How are both my Mohawk mother's story and my own, universal in terms of experience that transcends understanding among Aboriginal People who are aiming to create organizational change?

Chapter IV

She's Gone

August 22, 2001

It was a typical summer day. My daughters were out with their friends, and I was enjoying the last few weeks of my summer holidays as many teachers do. I had plans to go grocery shopping and head to the drugstore for some last minute items to pack. We were planning a family trip to see my Mom in Saskatoon in a few days. The night before I had picked up the phone to call her, and then put the phone down. I was going to tell her how excited I was to come and see her in a few days. I put the phone down thinking that I would call her tomorrow, as she might be resting. I didn't realize at the time how much I would regret not making that call. I looked out the window at the sunny blue sky, the wind blowing in the trees, and thought these could be the last few days of enjoying the quiet, lazy days of summer, and feeling at peace.

Three weeks previous, my mother had been given three months to live. Her lupus and rheumatoid arthritis had plagued her body for over 20 years, and her heart and lungs were wearing out. Mom now had emphysema, congestive heart failure and pulmonary edema. She had been on full time oxygen for two years. Her health condition had deteriorated over the past few years, and she was on powerful steroids and pain killers to combat her disease and chronic pain. She was always the fighter and kept her disease private except for sharing with family and a few close friends. Mom admitted to me she was tired and was ready to meet her Creator, but said that she needed to see me and my family one last time. She had started reading the Bible about a year prior, and was beginning to feel that she was ready to move into the Spirit World. Mom assured me she was holding on until we came out to visit. I was going to make arrangements with my

employer to take a personal leave of absence so I could be with her for her final days and weeks. This trip would be the last time I would see my Mom, and I knew it was going to be a difficult few months ahead.

The phone rang loudly and interrupted my thoughts. “Cammy, is that you?” asked my younger sister. “She’s gone Cammy, she’s gone!” sobbed my sister.

“What do you mean she’s gone?” I yelled.

“Mom is dead. We found her this morning,” she cried. I dropped the phone on the bed and started screaming. I could...not...breathe. My chest tightened up. I began to pace the floor. Thoughts were rushing through my head. *How is this possible? It’s only been three weeks! The doctors said three months. This can’t be true. There must be some mistake.* It took a couple of hours for it all to sink in. Mom was dead. She’s gone.

I made immediate arrangements to drive out to Saskatoon with my family. Although we knew she was gone, there was still a sense of urgency for me to get there. I needed to see it for myself to believe it. I arranged with the hospital to see my Mom in the morgue. I didn’t want to – I had to. I hadn’t seen my Mom in almost a year, although we spoke on the phone frequently. We probably had talked more times than usual in the past year because I used her as my sounding board for work, and she was close with my middle daughter who was struggling through her teenage years.

The morgue is what I thought it would be – cold, sterile and bright. You could hear the hum of what I thought was probably the electricity to keep the room cool. I was asked by the nurse if I was absolutely sure that I wanted to do this, and I assured her that I needed to. When I rounded the corner I saw my Mom, she looked peaceful. She had lost a lot of weight, and looked somewhat frail. Her skin was pale. She looked so serene

you would have thought that she was in a deep sleep. I looked at her chest to actually see if she was breathing, as she looked that alive. I knew once I had seen her that she was now pain-free and with her Creator. As I started crying I tried to convince myself that she was ready to go, and her body just couldn't hold out any longer. I knew that if she could have held on to see me, she would have.

I started to think about what a great loss it was to me and my daughters who had lost their Kokum, her colleagues and her profession. It wasn't fair for her to leave this world at such a young age, with so much more to offer. I wondered how I was going to go on without her. She had been there for me as my Mom, my mentor, my consoler, and my biggest cheerleader since I could remember. I went through some turbulent times with her in my teens and late twenties, but we had been close for many years. The pain was intense and almost took my breath away. My husband held me and we cried together as I let my Mom go.

Debra had just turned 61 years old, and her death was the catalyst for my rebirth to discover who I was as a Mohawk woman. Her passing made me contemplate what legacy I want to leave behind for my children, as my mother had for me.

Chapter V

Humble Beginnings: The Early Years

1960-1966

I have sometimes wondered how things might have been if my Mom would have stayed with my father. How would my life be different? What different lessons might I have learned? Would my Mom have taught me what she did had she remained in a marriage that was stifling her? Mabel was married at the age of 20 to a tall, handsome, blonde hair, blue-eyed Norwegian man, and was immediately whisked away to Fort Simpson, Northwest Territories to begin her new life as a married woman. My Mom's previous six years were spent staying with family members in Toronto and doing odd jobs, while carefully seeking out who her husband would be. My Mom told me that she had many suitors who wanted her hand in marriage, but she was careful on who she chose.

I guess back in those days you didn't talk too much about when or if you plan to have children, and it was before the pill was abundantly available. At any rate, within three years of being married, my Mom had three children – one a year, and each almost a year apart. I was the third one. My Mom was probably so busy with all of us kids that she didn't have time to take any baby photos of me. The first photo I have is when I was three. My auntie moved up north to help my Mom out when my Mom was pregnant with me. I was due to arrive in a month and my Mom became sick. My Mom was told she



Mabel Froman and my father on their wedding day (1960)

had placenta previa that required a caesarian section. My aunt came to help out with my one year old sister and two year old brother while my Mom was in the hospital in Edmonton. My auntie has shown me a picture of what our house looked like in Fort Simpson. It was small, she said, but there was room for her to stay to help with the kids. At that time my auntie would have been only 17 years old, and almost fresh out of residential school.

When I was born I weighed only three pounds, and was only a foot long. I was pretty sick as a baby and Mom had to stay with me in the hospital for about a month. Mom referred to me as the “sickly” child due to my small size, chronic ear infections and tonsillitis. The benefit of being the sickly child meant that I got more time to spend with her. So sick or not, I considered myself lucky.

I am not sure what happened between my Mom and my father over the next couple of years, but she packed us all up and moved to Winnipeg by the time I was three. My Mom was only 23 years old and became a single Mom to three kids in a large, strange city. My Mom received \$25.00 / child every month for child support for us three kids. My father was never late on his money orders, and the amount never increased, no matter what age we were. I think my Mom was just happy to get out of the remoteness of Fort Simpson, and to an urban center where she could spread her wings.

Growing up in Poverty: 547 Bowman Avenue

We moved many times as kids, usually “upgrading” from one house to another. All of our homes were rental





Mabel Debra
(circa late 1960s)

properties – my Mom never did own her own home. Our first two homes were in the North End of Winnipeg. It was a cheaper place to live in the city and a lot of new Canadians settled there. Our Bowman house was in a nicer area of town referred to as East Kildonan. Life was hard for me with two other siblings and a Mom who was a workaholic. Debra’s children were raised to be an active part of the household. We had responsibilities from a young age and it was expected that we contribute to the day-to-day functions of the home. My Mom had to make sacrifices so that she could provide for her family. That meant working long hours in low paying jobs so she could pay the bills. One of my jobs was to assist in doing the household laundry, whether that meant going into the unfinished basement and using the wringer washer or hiking to the laundromat with garbage bags on our red wagon. Pinky’s Laundromat – I remember it well, as I spent many a Sunday there doing everyone’s laundry. I wonder what other people thought of two seven and eight year old girls hauling two large bags of laundry in a wagon through the snow every week – what a sight that must have been! To us, it was just normal stuff that you do on a weekend, and for the most part we made it fun and an adventure. There were high expectations for us children to keep the household running smoothly, even if Mom was not there. If she wasn’t at home, she made sure we knew what was to be done via notes and reminders that ended with a red lipstick kiss.

We were poor and could only afford second-hand furniture, so that is when the Simpson Sears catalogue came in hand for dreaming. I started that dream when I was five years old. “Who took the Sears catalogue?” my Mom would shout upstairs in our

Bowman Avenue home. My older sister and I shared the tiny upstairs bedroom that held only two twin beds and an end table. I would quickly try to put the book back together so that she wouldn't notice that I removed a few pages. In the end table went the scissors and sticky glue and I would rush the catalogue downstairs to her. Many of our clothes came from the Simpson Sears book and I wanted to make sure that my Mom had it in case she was going to place an order.

Mom would say, "You can have furniture like that one day, you know. You have to do well in school so you can graduate and get a good job. I don't want you to have to work as hard as I do. I didn't graduate and look at me – I now have to work two jobs to pay for this house and you kids." This message was a regular recording for me growing up. I had no problem doing school work, because since kindergarten, school had become my haven and safety net.

The First of Many Secrets

Every day my Mom would sit with us while we did our homework. Although Mom was not an active parent member in the school itself, she ensured and insisted that school work was completed at home every night at the kitchen table. Being educated was a strong value that she upheld and shared, and she was always interested in what we were doing in school and what clubs we were involved in. I recall one day when she was helping me to make a tipi for a class project. I remember that I had the choice between researching Plains Indians or Eskimos. I chose to write about Indians. In my report, I had spelled Indians with a lower case "I" (indians). She asked why I had done that, and suggested that I knew better.

“A capital means it is important. I didn’t want my teacher to think that Indians were more important, so I left off the capital,” I stated matter-of-factly. My Mom had taught me that we were all equal according to the Creator, and so it didn’t make sense to me to capitalize our ancestry with a big “I” and have it stand out as more important.

“We are Indians and we are important. Now get your eraser out and fix your work,” she insisted. I felt a bit confused and embarrassed that I made that error – after all, I was one of the top spellers at Polson School. I also was too ashamed to tell my Mom that I did not tell my teacher that I was an Indian – but alas, that secret would soon



**Polson Elementary School
Attended Grades 1-3**

be revealed.

In grade two, I reluctantly asked my Mom to come into my school for meet-the-teacher night. She hadn’t come to any other school events, conferences or meetings since I

had started school, so I was pretty confident that this invitation would be rejected as well. Much to my surprise and dismay, she agreed to go. I told her that it was “no big deal” and if she had to work or if she was too busy it would be totally fine if she missed it. Mom usually worked evenings and I was confused as to why she wanted to go.

“I haven’t met your teacher ... what’s her name? I guess it won’t kill me to meet her” she stated. Debra had not been in an elementary school since leaving the day school on the Six Nations Reserve back in the early 1950s. That suited me fine. I didn’t really want her in my school, my sanctuary, my home away from home anyways.

I tried pretending I wasn't feeling well and suggested that we miss the event at school. My mother began to get irritated with my whining, so I decided to keep quiet and just hope for the best. You should have seen the look on the teachers and students faces when Debra walked into the school. I kept my face aimed towards the grey tiled floors and hoped that no one would notice or recognize me. Picture a tall, hefty, long-haired Indian woman strutting down the hall complete with mukluks, beaded headband, and her little fair-skinned, blonde daughter in tow. It was a sight to be seen, particularly when my Mom kept muttering for me to smarten up and would hoist me upwards so I would walk straight.

“Well, now. Who is this, Cammy?” Miss Ford asked.

“I am Camela's mother. Who are you?” questioned my mother as she glared at Miss Ford, my favorite teacher.

I couldn't have been more embarrassed when Miss Ford replied, “I am Miss Ford, Cammy's teacher. Cammy, you didn't tell me that you were an Indian...” Now, *I* had the misfortune of having my Mom's glare be returned to me. At that point, my face went beet red, and I wanted to climb under a table, a rock, or anything handy.

When we returned home my Mom was unusually quiet. I think she was trying to formulate her words so that her seven year old daughter would understand. She realized that I had been ashamed of being Indian all this time. All of her teachings, all of the visits to pow-wows, and her daughter was still ashamed.

“Cammy, there is something I want to tell you,” she said softly after some time had passed. “The reason I married your father is because I wanted to have children who were fair-skinned like you. There were Indian men I could have chosen to be your

father, but I chose your blue-eyed, blonde-haired father so that my children could have the benefit of looking White. I did not want you kids to have to go through life being judged on the color of your skin. Do you understand this?" she asked.

I didn't really understand the impact of her words at the time even though I nodded and promised not to hide who I was anymore. I only knew that my brown-skinned sibling was teased, and I overheard my Mom's stories about not being able to find housing or work because she was an Indian. Although I was *told* to be proud of being an Indian, I *saw* and *heard* the negative consequences of sharing this information. I also felt that I couldn't relate to the Indians I was learning about in school through the books and pictures. We didn't live in tipis, make campfires, hunt buffalo or dress in buckskin. Why was I being taught that Indians are just from long ago? The reality of being an Indian and learning about Indians at school was very confusing to a seven year old. My young mind decided to only speak out about being an Indian only if I felt safe doing so. Keeping silent about my Mohawkness was more prevalent in my childhood and adolescent years than when I matured into adulthood. Incidentally, I got an A+ on my Plains Indian project. It was the first and only time I ever learned about Aboriginal people while in school.

The Teasing Begins

In school it was easy to pretend things were different, and not really the way they were. No one needed to know what your home life was like, who your parents were, or even who your siblings were. I kept to myself, being the shy kid that I was. However, after my Mom's visit to my school, things changed for me. I went from a shy seven year old girl, to a terrified seven year old girl. Once the other students got wind that I was an

Indian the teasing became incessant. If I didn't walk to school with my older sister, I would be dodging behind buildings trying not to get beat up or called names. Dismissal after school was a nightmare. I would offer to stay after school and clean the chalkboards, straighten papers, and wipe desks – anything to linger a bit longer so that the school bullies would have got bored and gone home. God forbid Miss Ford didn't need my help that day! That meant having to find creative escape routes to avoid the wrath of three older female bullies. The usual fifteen minute walk home would sometimes take over forty minutes. Then I would get home and have to hear it from my brother and sister on how late I was and how they wouldn't get stuck doing my chores because I chose to dawdle.

I am not sure what hurt the most, the shoves, slaps, scratches and whips by the skipping ropes, or the racial slurs. Names like *dirty squaw*, *dirty Indian* and worse, kids



Cammy at 8 years old

saying, *your Mom's a big, fat Indian*, and then they'd proceed with a war whoop to finish of the rant. These events were the norm for me. Kids can be ruthless and will find any reason to tease and single out "different" kids. It also didn't help that I had disfigured teeth at the time. Back when I was a sickly toddler, I was given an antibiotic (tetracycline) for ear and tonsil infections. They affected the color, shape and positioning of my permanent teeth. Part of being shy also meant not wanting to smile with my mouth open so that I didn't have to show my ugly teeth. (Even up until I had my teeth fixed at the age of 25, I always smiled with my mouth closed). So add the Indianness, being bullied and crooked teeth to the mix, it made for being an unhappy kid with low self-esteem.

Being poor for me also included having decayed teeth. I never recall brushing my teeth at night, or even owning a toothbrush. I remember feeling embarrassed at a sleep over when all of the girls went to brush their teeth before bed and I didn't have a toothbrush. I lied and said that I forgot it at home. I did not see a dentist until I was ten years old. I think it was only when the public health nurse insisted that my Mom take me to the dentist after a routine school dental check that she found the way to pay for it. When I saw the dentist my sister and I had to take an hour bus ride through the North End for four appointments while I had my teeth cleaned, polished and eight cavities filled. I recall the first time I had my teeth cleaned. They felt so smooth and clean and I felt proud to show off my teeth. On the way home from the dentist, a cute older boy smiled at me. I gave him a smile back, teeth and all. He responded by smacking the boy beside him and telling him that I had the ugliest teeth he had ever seen. I immediately went back to the toothless smile for the next 15 years.

Back to grade two....I noticed that the bullies kept their mouth shut whenever my older siblings were around. I started to think strategically. I finally found my voice and shared what was going on with my older sister. I realized that by staying silent I was only hurting myself and the situation would not change. I knew I could have said something to my mother, but I didn't want her to make a scene and so I opted for my sister to assist me. My big sister at that time was popular, athletic, and had the reputation for being a tough girl. So I enlisted her to help me one day after school. For that one day, it was magic. My sister confronted the three bullies, and after some yelling in the alley the bigger of the girls slapped my sister right across the face – hard. That did not deter her mission. She then proceeded to whip them good with her skipping rope. She

got them all a few times before the larger girl started to recover and attack back. At that point my sister took the lead and we ran like mad back to the house as fast as we could and quickly locked the door. My sister, still breathing heavy from the sprint to our house, looked over at me and informed me between labored breaths that from then on, I was on my own. My tough sister was backing down? This surprised and disappointed me, but I knew I had to go to school and continue to employ different avoidance techniques and strategies if I was going to survive the bullies and my grade two school year.

I was bullied until I left Polson School, which was up to the age of nine. I learned very young what racism felt like. I learned at that time that it was best to keep your mouth shut (for more reasons than one – hah!) about who you are and who your family is. I never did tell my Mom about being bullied, nor did I tell my beloved teachers. I was ashamed to share what was happening at school, because I somehow thought it was my fault. I thought it was “normal” to be teased about being an Indian, because my Mom was a victim of racism, as was my older brother. I remember my Mom telling her friends that you just have to *Stand up and Keep Fighting*. I was too young to fully understand what that meant, but her words would come back to guide me in later years. I also learned at a young age that if I didn’t tell anyone that I was an Indian, then I would get treated better. After all, didn’t my Mom say that she didn’t want me to experience racism, and that was why she hoped for fair-skinned children? So I learned to keep my cultural identity hidden during my elementary years. The only time I truly wanted to be an Indian was when we went to the summer pow-wows with my Mom.

The Beat Goes On

I had a love / hate attitude towards attending the summer pow-wows as a kid. My Mom made it clear and there was no exception – you were expected to come along whether you wanted to or not. I tried to find the hiding spot furthest from the big tent so that I could go and be by myself, or hang out with my sister. Undoubtedly, at some point or another, my Mom would seek me out to make me join in on the dancing. That was when the looks would come from the brown-skinned Indians in the tent. With my dirty blonde hair and fair skin – I sure didn't look like the typical Indian kid at the pow-wow. The adults would stare and then joke with my Mom, "There must have been a White man out near the wood pile, hey Debbie?" Asking a fair-skinned shy kid to dance at a pow-wow was about the worst fate you could ask for. You might as well shine a spot light on me and announce, "White kid about to dance! Come watch!" I hated this part of the weekend; however, I loved hearing the beat of the drum and listening to the singers. I hated being singled out and stared at by other Indians and made to feel different and unwelcome. What I didn't realize was that this would not be the first time I would feel discrimination from fellow Aboriginal people.

The lull of the drum is what got me excited to go to the pow-wow in the first place. Hearing the singers and watching the beautiful dancers was the highlight of my weekend. I loved to watch the adults dance and the jingle dance was my favorite. I would feel sorry for the dancers having to wear their heavy buckskinned dresses and leggings in the heat. In the evenings we would watch the men jig on the outdoor plywood stage. The children were encouraged to join in on the jigging, but I found it more fun to watch and clap along. In the evenings we would lie in the tent and hear

laughter, yelling, and conversations that seemed to go on all night long. The alcohol flowed like water at the pow-wows and you never got much sleep during those weekends. We had to listen to the odd fight, usually between the men. We knew that no one would dare to bother Debbie's daughters and so we felt safe. Mom had a reputation as a tough woman that no one would want to mess with. It was always sad to leave the pow-wow, and the sound of the drum could be heard in my head for weeks after. My Mom taught us to be thankful for the pow-wow opportunities and to be respectful of the dancers who were sharing their time and talent with us so that we could learn about and from the diverse dances. My feelings of being different never went away when I was around a lot of other Aboriginal people. I brushed it off because my Mom ensured that we were learning more about our culture, and for the most part it was fun getting out of Winnipeg for a weekend.

More Secrets

I now know that my Mom only wanted the best for her children. As a child, you don't understand the motives of your parents but you cope and just try to survive. When my Mom met my youngest sister's father, she thought she was getting a "good man" who obviously loved kids because he was willing to take on three that were not his own. He came into my life when I was about three years old, and was a part of my childhood until I was almost 11. I remember him making us supper on the nights when my Mom was working. He had been a cook and we always wondered what he would conjure up with the few groceries that we had. He worked at a local department store and he used to take me there to sit in his office chair. I loved him and he was the only male role model I ever had in my life. At that time, Mom was completing university course upgrading, and

working a full-time job as a worker for the Main Street Project in downtown Winnipeg. She was actively involved in various Aboriginal organizations around the city. She worked many evenings and most weekends because she had to.

Debra worked hard to build a career and having three kids was a huge responsibility for a now up-and-coming career woman. She had four strikes going against her in the 60s – being a female, an Indian, a single mother, and being poor. Although we loved her dearly, we sometimes thought that she loved her jobs more. There was always a deep love for my Mom and I wished that she could be home more with us as we were growing up. As I became older I could understand why my Mom needed to work so hard. She had low paying jobs and needed to work overtime in order to pay the bills. She also looked Aboriginal and had difficulty landing good jobs with her lack of education. However, my Mom was a trooper and loved working and meeting new people. She was determined to find a way to give back and do ‘good’ for her people. She was in her mid to late 20’s when she met my step dad, and he was the closest thing I would ever have to a real dad.

My Mom didn’t know that the new love of her life was also a pedophile. If she did, she might have killed him. This was a secret that was kept from my mother for over two decades. My story will not go into the details of what I witnessed as a child, but I can share that I escaped being the direct victim of sexual abuse. I was fearful though, because I was aware of what my step dad was capable of. Looking back I can say that what I observed was terrifying and life-changing, and yet I knew that if my step dad tried anything on me, I would “fight back” like I had heard my Mom say to her friends. As young as I was, I wonder if I gave off a vibe that made my step dad stay away from

me. Maybe he knew that I was too close to my Mom and I would tell. I do not know the reasons that I was not chosen as his victim, I am just thankful that I wasn't.

In 1970, my youngest sister was born. Sharing a room with a crying newborn wasn't fun. She was a beloved daughter to my Mom and step dad since my Mom had lost a son to crib death about a year before she came along. Losing status as the baby of the family was not easy, and I resented this new addition to the family. The house became even smaller after she was born, and my Mom started looking for a larger house for her now, family of six. This would now be the fourth house I would live at in six years.

87 Linden Avenue

When we moved to Linden, we really thought we were "moving up in the world." My mother thought a bigger house in a nice neighborhood near a good school, close to the river and a big backyard was the perfect place to make a fresh start. The two years we

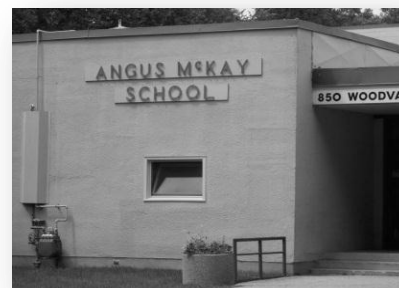


spent here were not happy ones for me. The common law relationship was starting to fall apart. The solution at that time was to get married to try to save the relationship. My Mom married my step dad when my youngest sister was turning three. That day and night was a fun affair for us kids and for a short time that day I was important because I was the bartender at the wedding. A lady sang at the small wedding of about 30 people, and I hoped that the marriage would work out and my step dad would be happy and stop his abusing.

Looking around that night and seeing the wine flow and hearing the laughter galore I thought that by joining in on the drinking might be the way to lessen my fears. I was ten years old and that was the first time I got tipsy by drinking Baby Duck wine. My Mom was not impressed that I had snuck a few sips behind the bar at the wedding. I remember being told to stay put on the beautiful Victorian settee in the “mansion” where my Mom married – and I envisioned having a home just like it when I got older.

During this time, my mother continued to work hard in her career including sitting on various committees. It was important for her to get her degree and she knew she needed to continue with the extra work to pay the bills. After she read our report cards, she would remind us how important it was to keep our marks up so we could go to university. She was proud of my straight “As” and would tell me that with those marks, I could do anything I wanted in life. I believed her and knew I could as well.

After only ten months, my mother’s marriage began to fall apart. For a short time we all moved to New Brunswick so my step dad could seek out a new job – that didn’t work out too well. I started my grade four year off at Angus McKay School, went to



Angus McKay Elementary School
Attended Grades 4-6

New Brunswick for a few months, and ended up back at my original school to finish up the year. I remember coming back in the late spring to my class, and a classmate saying, “What are you doing back here? Didn’t you just leave?” Shortly after our trip out east, the marriage ended. There was much fighting in the house so we were all relieved when my Mom finally called it quits. Although I missed my step dad, I was happy that my

Mom seemed more relaxed and stress-free now that he had moved out. I know that I was feeling much happier and safer as well.

At the start of the summer of 1973, my younger sister and I went out to visit my step dad for the months of July and August in Lethbridge. At first it was a carefree summer that consisted of running through the sprinkler, playing with new friends, and babysitting my three year old sister. However, after a few weeks, things started to feel strange between my step dad and me. It was suddenly expected that I bathe with the bathroom door open. I found the reason of not wanting my younger sister to get hurt somewhat odd considering I was bathing with her. I decided to close the shower curtain as a way to shield myself from his glances. I brushed it off to my step dad just acting weird and being too protective. Then came the day when my step dad decided that I needed a new swimsuit. A one piece suit wouldn't do and he insisted that it had to be an itty bitty orange bikini. I felt embarrassed coming out of the change room and being told to parade around while he and his male buddy ogled me. The final straw was when he tried to touch me. Just as he was making his move the voice of my mother came clearly into my head, "*Stand up and Fight!*" That is exactly what I did. I got up, looked him in the eye and told him to never touch me like that again. I told him to "*GET LOST*" in the sternest way a ten year old can. I took my little sister and ran and locked us both in the bedroom. When I heard him leave the house I immediately ran and phoned my Mom to tell her that my step dad made me feel uncomfortable and we needed to come home. She drove from Winnipeg to Lethbridge in record time to pick up me and my little sister. After a heated argument between my Mom and my drunken step dad we left, and I didn't see him again for another 15 years. Thank God I used my voice then. Although I

was raised to be respectful of my Elders, and I loved my step dad, I knew that I needed to speak out because what had occurred was wrong. Although my Mom was far away when the incident occurred, her voice was in my mind when that signifying moment made me react the way I did. My mother was proud of me for speaking out and hugged me tight.

When I was 11 years old, my Mom took in a new house boarder in order to help make ends meet. It might have provided more money for the household, but it was a scary time for me. I was leery of men now, and this boarder was openly gay. Back in the 70s admitting your homosexuality was not common and was frightening for a naïve child who thought being gay was contagious. I told my Mom that I didn't like the boarder, but she told me he was harmless and that he was helping to pay the bills. Having a gay boarder in the house with young girls is a testament to how open my Mom was with people who were discriminated against by society. She was accepting of all people and wanted to help those who were in need. She didn't care if you were gay, Black, homeless, a drug user or had a criminal record. I do wonder about my mother's boundaries back in those years, but I don't think it occurred to her that strangers in our home could impact her children negatively. Perhaps she thought because the boarder was gay that he would not be of any harm to three young girls. He actually was harmless, but I still thought it was strange to have this guy living in our basement. He taught me that gay men were just like any other people. I even came to know and liked his partner who was welcomed to our house for dinner and became a part of the household.

Sydney Avenue

We lived on Sydney Avenue for three years. During those years in Winnipeg, Debra became one of the founding members of the Native Women's Transition Centre, Native Clan, and later worked for the Indian and Metis Friendship Centre. She was busy building her career



Sydney Avenue, East Kildonan

while her children were quickly growing up in front of her eyes. Much of the committee work that my Mom was involved in took time to get established. In the 1970s, she was one of few female Aboriginal social workers who were willing to fight for social justice in a predominantly non-Aboriginal system that held on fast to status quo. This was a time that Aboriginal children were being removed from their homes for reasons of neglect as described by the dominant society. The committees were important work for Debra and the small team of mostly female Aboriginal social workers who were trying to make the lives of Aboriginal families better.

Mom would tell me that when she started up a new committee or a new position that in the first months and even year, it was important to listen, listen, listen, and listen more. Debra shared it was only through finding out the perspectives of others that one can learn how to proceed with an awareness and understanding. The next step after listening was to be able to share your own knowledge and understanding based on recognizing the needs of others. Debra reinforced that working together equitably was the key for the Aboriginal voices to be heard. This was interesting learning to hear as a

child and it wasn't until my thirties that I realized how important her words would be for me.

My Mom was a tough cookie. She was a no nonsense kind of woman and her colleagues knew and respected her because of this. She was not afraid to use her voice to speak out against injustices against Indians. As a leader in the field of social work, she told me that she had been called a "bitch" (and worse), and yet she felt she was doing the good work of advocating for Aboriginal families. She resented how she could be described in this way and yet her male co-workers were referred to as "tough decision-makers" or "strong." This can be typical when females enter leadership roles that are dominated by men. Although she might have been hired because she was an Aboriginal person, there was still discrimination within the workplace and a reluctance to make any structural changes.

At home my mother was the matriarch of the family, no matter if she was living with a man or not. She made it clear to us that if we wanted school supplies or new school clothes, we would need to find a way to get it. Otherwise, we would need to be happy with hand-me-downs that she could get for free. She taught us to work hard and be independent. While all the other girls in school were wearing flared leg jeans, I would be wearing the skinny jeans – because they were out of style and cheaper. Wearing different clothes was a way of life so I just accepted it, until I hit around 11 years of age.

"Cammy, come look at this newspaper ad. We could be nannies for the summer and earn our own money! It looks like we could come home every Sunday, so it's not like it's every day," my older sister chatted excitedly. She was excited at the prospect of a) making some money, and b) getting away from home for the summer, and I was too.

“See Mom, if we went across town as nannies for the summer, you wouldn’t have to worry about getting us clothes for the fall,” I reasoned with my mother later that day.

“Yeah, and we could buy our own school supplies,” added my sister. My Mom was contemplating the pros and cons to this proposal: getting rid of two kids for the summer and them buying their own school gear seemed like a win-win.

“Okay girls. I will let you two go under two conditions: Find your own way to and from these jobs, and when you come home on Sundays, expect there to be chores to do. You will still both be a part of this household. You also need to look out for each other,” she said.

“YES Mom!” my sister and I responded in unison. Our summer adventure was about to begin. We couldn’t be more excited at the prospect of being independent and bragging that we were about to be nannies to rich kids. What I didn’t know at the time is that my mother was likely so agreeable to our new summer jobs as she did the same when she was younger. Her autobiography states:

I started working at the age of 10 babysitting for families and not receiving the money for this – Oh sure, I was told it went toward clothes & books for school. Maybe it did – who knows: According to Reserve standards I was okay in that regard (D. Black autobiography excerpt, 1982).

I wondered who would hire an 11 year old nanny. A wealthy Jewish family in the River Heights area of town decided to take a chance on me. They were a nice enough family, but they sure worked me hard. I would be up at the crack of dawn feeding a two year old boy and his four year old sister. I would get them ready for the

park and then stay there until noon. At noon we would all get fed. While I was doing the dishes, the mother, Marcy, would put her kids down for a nap. That's when I would get a two hour break. But during that break I was not allowed to contact my sister who was a nanny across the street. So I would just sit outside and work on my Sears home project, write in my journal, or take a nap myself. When the kids woke up I would take them to the park again, come home, do their laundry, eat supper, and then have a couple of hours off each night to visit with my sister.

I remember once that Marcy had a party and invited about seven or eight ladies over. She made me sit outside in the rain while the party was going on. My sister thought she was mean. I didn't even think twice about it as I felt uncomfortable being around these "different" people. The women sitting in the formal living room with little black dresses on, eating appetizers and sipping white wine was certainly not anything I was accustomed to seeing or being a part of. I grew up poor, so a big night for me was to sit at our kitchen make-shift picnic table eating Kentucky Fried chicken and listening to Jim Reeves on 8-track tape. I was content to sit outside in my out-of-style skinny wet jeans to wait for the party to end.

I earned exactly \$20.00/week for that job back in 1974. My sister got an extra \$5.00/week for her nanny job because she was a year older. I didn't think that was fair especially because she got her own bedroom, and I had to sleep on a rickety cot in a room shared with the toddler. For my first paycheck I was eager to buy my first pair of "fashionable" jeans, only to find out that they were \$25.00 a pair. I had to wait and work a further week before I could buy them. I loved that I could buy my own things and enjoyed having my own cash. I could actually buy clothes from the Sears catalogue if I

wanted to! My Mom had said that I could attain every dream if I kept in school. Maybe so, but working earned me cash – and I liked it.

The second Sunday came and I was ready to hop on the bus to head home like I did the previous Sunday with my sister. My employers insisted that they drive me home because my sister was out with her new family and they were dropping her off later. I didn't want them to see my house or, God forbid, meet my Mom. You see, I didn't want them to know that I was Aboriginal and think any less of me or my family. I thought that if they knew I was Mohawk in the first place they might not have hired me. My mother's racist experiences weighed on my mind and I did not want to be treated poorly because of my Aboriginal ancestry. I remembered that my Mom taught me that respect works both ways in that I am no better than non-Aboriginal people are and vice-versa. She shared that we are all on the same level, yet I found this difficult to believe. Marcy and her husband were being very kind and so I allowed them to drive me home.

When Marcy took a look at our home she turned to me and said, "Cammy, I didn't know that you were poor. If I had known that, I would have put aside some of those things that we just sold in our garage sale for you."

"Thanks Marcy, but that's okay. See you tomorrow!" I stammered as I made a bee line for the back door. I didn't want there to be any chance of my Mom coming out or Marcy coming in. Mom had not met this Jewish family I lived with and I wanted to keep it that way. I didn't know how to react to Marcy's statement about me being poor. Part of me would have loved her hand-me-downs, yet the other part was full of pride and would never accept her hand outs. I felt just like my Mom and didn't want to receive things from others because they felt sorry for me. I decided at that time that I would

never buy used things. I would only buy new things because I deserved it. I vowed that I would work hard like my Mom so I could get the things I really wanted.

Those Sundays were busy. My sister and I would walk in to enough chores to keep us busy for most of the day. I would arrive home around 11:00 AM to find my Mom fast asleep from working night shift and our teenage male boarder downstairs playing Alice Cooper on the record player. As I cleaned the house and did laundry, I daydreamed about my future. I was happy to be making my own money and able to afford new clothes. I wanted to have the nice house like the Jewish family I was the nanny for. I wanted to have normalcy in my life, and I looked forward to getting away from home. At my young age I was being assimilated into the Euro-Canadian world and was slowly taking steps away from poverty and being Mohawk. I liked the world outside of my home and knew I wanted better. And so I would do my chores and never complain, after all, that is the deal I made. I never told that Jewish family that I was Aboriginal. It was a mission to not allow my Mom and my newly adopted perfect family to meet that summer. I had too much pride and didn't want to be treated differently. I was building up my self-esteem, feeling like I was losing my Aboriginality, becoming less shy, and determined to step out of the grips of poverty. I started to enjoy living in an upper middle-class home with the fancy parties. I thought it was cool to eat sandwiches without the crusts and drink real orange juice anytime I wanted. It was fun to do my laundry in their fancy new washer and dryer and even loading the dishwasher was not a chore. I felt that I could not be Mohawk *and* have money and so I decided to repress my Mohawkness at the time and assimilate fully as a White person, all the while keeping this a secret from my mother.

School as a Tween

I entered John Henderson Junior High when I was 11 years old, at the end of my new career of being a summer nanny. I had earned \$160.00 that summer, and I was proud to have purchased my own new clothes, winter jacket, and school supplies. I was even proud that I could buy my own cigarettes now that I was a full-time smoker. My Mom would still divvy up the carton of smokes to her three older children at grocery time, but I was pleased I could buy my own if I ran out. Back in the 70s, smoking was not considered dangerous or habit forming, and although we couldn't smoke in school, we were allowed to smoke on school property, in restaurants, etc. I am surprised I even survived the 70s era due to drinking and driving, riding in the back of our station wagon and pick-up trucks, hitch-hiking, eating raw wieners for a snack, and not wearing a seatbelt. Heck, I remember riding in the back window of my step dad's Karmann Ghia and we all thought it was fun! I was excited to be entering grade seven and was looking forward to my first year in junior high. We lived about two kilometers from school, and I was thrilled to have Mr. Chan as my homeroom teacher.



**John Henderson Junior High
Attended Grades 7 – 9**

Because of my Mom's long hours she was seldom home in the evenings. My younger sister was cared for by neighbors or us, depending on the day. In the evenings my older sister and I would venture out to River Heights and meet up with random boys that we would talk to through a phone hot line. It was the norm for us to head out in the evenings and meet strange guys from other areas across the city. We were never fearful

because we were as close as two sisters could get and we knew we had each other to rely on. At that time, it was pretty innocent interactions with boys. Hanging out, going for walks, holding hands – the odd kiss. Sometimes, if we didn't have bus fare, my sister and I would hitch-hike. I remember one man who picked us up not far from our house. He immediately power locked the doors and proposed that he drive out to a remote area, bound and rape us. My sister and I looked at each other and I took her silent lead to play it very cool. I was already contemplating how I would kick, scream and hurt him if he tried to touch me. That driver didn't follow through, thank God, and later said that he was just trying to warn us of the dangers of hitch-hiking. I thought he was pretty creepy to say and do what he did. However, that scare wasn't enough to deter us from catching rides with strangers, and like many young people feel, we thought that we were invincible. We never worried about things like being kidnapped or raped. I felt that I had seen enough horrible things that if someone dare try to hurt me, I would hurt them back even worse.

Although my mother was a strict disciplinarian, she was lax about certain aspects of parenting. Through visiting other cousins and Aboriginal families in our community, I noticed similar type of parenting techniques. For example, Mom generally never asked or investigated where we would be going at night, even though her daughters were only 11 and 12 years of age. Her rule was that as long as you are home on the last bus, see you later and have fun. My mother had trust in us and believed that we could make good decisions. We knew that getting up for school in the morning was non-negotiable, so it was never an option to sleep in. I loved school at the time and it was never a chore for me to get out of bed. Unless we were vomiting or our temperature was over 103 degrees,

my mother expected us to be at school. We weren't supervised outside or when we rode the bus – we were proud to know all of the bus routes around the city by the time we were 11 or 12. We were independent and self-reliant at a young age – and proud of it. These traits have helped me as a leader in later life. Although I enjoy working with others, I am also quite content to work independently on projects and can find jobs to do that others choose not to do.

I loved school until my grade eight year when I was 12 years old. Up until that point I had adored each and every one of my teachers. School was my haven and always a safe place for me. I always knew what to expect and looked forward to seeing the smiling familiar faces at school each day. I wanted to be a teacher and be able to wear a skirt and high heels and use a chalk holder to hold the chalk. I wanted to have my students look up to me like I did my teachers. My love of school changed one miserable cold day in the late fall of 1976. In grade seven I discovered that I was pretty good at basketball and played center for our junior high girls' team. The following year I was anxious to play again, but our practices were limited because they were building a new gym. Our makeshift gym was two classrooms with the middle wall removed. It was small and did not compare to our old gym and I was getting restless to play. One day I “stepped out of line” according to Mr. Chan, my teacher and now basketball coach.

“Mr. Chan, when is our new gym going to be finished?” I asked. I had interrupted Mr. Chan from coaching basketball to answer what I thought to be a very important question. He did not look impressed with me.

“Hopefully it will be ready in two weeks,” he replied quickly. It was clear that he was agitated and yet I continued on, partly because my friend was with me and I was trying to appear cool.

“Well it better be,” I retorted, “I want to play basketball in a *real* gym.” At that point, Mr. Chan grabbed me by my shirt near my neck, yanked me up into his face and yelled, “Don’t you EVER talk to me that way again!” He then let go of my shirt and I touched the floor again. I had never been more humiliated and embarrassed than I was at that moment. I was so close to him I could smell the coffee on his breath. He scared me. He lost my respect and trust at that moment. He represented all the good things that school had to offer. I felt that I no longer had a safe haven, a place to take my worries away. This signifying moment in my life was so profound that I made a commitment to myself that when I became a teacher, I would never, ever yell at a student, embarrass them or make them feel that their questions were not worthy or valued. From that instant I hated teachers and my school and wanted to get out of there as fast as I could.

Shortly after that incident, my brother got kicked out of John Henderson Junior High School. He was in grade nine at the time and was 14 years old. It seems that he didn’t like how his teacher was speaking to him, and his teacher got into his personal space. He retaliated by punching him in the nose and fracturing it. He was expelled that day and never returned to school. I remember my Mom coming home from a school meeting sharing how the principal and the teacher were racist and how they can all go to hell. My brother was now an official high school drop out at the age of 14. The sad part was that my brother was a talented athlete and artist who would never get to show the world how special he really was.

The only positive thing that came from that experience was that I got a little more respect from my classmates after the nose breaking incident. My classmates couldn't believe that he was my brother, and suggested they wouldn't want to mess with him. When they asked if I was Indian like my brother, I lied and said I was adopted. Why wreck a good thing? I didn't want to change the way I was being treated by my classmates. I didn't want them to know I was an Indian because I thought I knew all that it stood for. I felt ashamed and deceitful, but knew it had to be done if I wanted to survive in this school that I now hated.

Chapter VI

Growing up Fast

Natural Consequences – Learning the Hard Way

I no longer had any interest in school and therefore did not complete any assigned homework, so I had a lot of time on my hands after the household chores were done. My Mom's work commitments and my loneliness took a toll. My life seemed chaotic and unbalanced and I became sad and disillusioned. I wondered if there was a way out of my pain. I was 12 years old when I attempted suicide. I had found some extra strength tablets that my Mom was using for aches and pains, and took about 15 pills. As I lay down on my bed to die I started to regret my decision. I got up, put my coat on and walked around outside. I got on a bus because I wanted to be around other people in case I died. I didn't want to die alone – I was already lonely enough. I was glad the pills didn't work. Looking back I could have become another statistic of an Aboriginal youth committing suicide because they were in pain and thought they had nothing further to live for. That would be my first and only attempt at suicide. I reminded myself to keep my dream alive of having the big house with the Sears furniture and I was determined to make a plan to get out of my present circumstances as soon as I could.

My older sister and I started hanging out at a local swimming pool on the weekends. It was there that I met Trevor shortly before I turned 13. At first there was innocent flirting, and within three months we were having sex at his place. I was just so happy to have someone love me and make me feel safe. I was lonely and really just wanted companionship. It was my way of retreating from the chaos at home, if only for a short while. Having sex was part of the package of the "intimacy" I thought I was

longing. With my Mom working, my siblings out with their friends, and a crazy boarder who pranced around wearing nothing but a speedo and Alice Cooper make-up, I needed an escape from the tumultuous and unpredictable home life. Trevor provided that escape even if it was a temporary fix. When he told me that I wouldn't get pregnant I believed him. I knew nothing about birth control, and so when my 16 year old boyfriend told me I would be fine, I trusted him. I had no reason not to and had no other experiences to compare it to. Although I told my sister and her friends about my sexual escapades, no one offered advice or warnings. I figured they were all having unprotected sex too.

Trevor had only met my Mom a couple of times. One night I missed the last bus and Trevor and I hitch-hiked home. By this time, we had moved to the Raleigh Street housing project in North Kildonan. I told Trevor that I was worried that my Mom wouldn't let me in.

“Why wouldn't your Mom let you in? It's after 1 AM and it is freezing out here,” Trevor asked incredulously. Thank goodness we had an extra kangaroo jacket or we might have gotten hypothermia.



55-1380 Raleigh Street, North Kildonan

“That's the point, Trevor. I missed the last bus and if that happens, my Mom told me not to bother coming home,” I stated matter-of-factly. Sure enough, the outside light was off and the door was locked. For about five minutes I tried throwing rocks at her bedroom window to no avail.

We sat out on the front steps for a while contemplating what to do. We ended up going for long walks, smoking, talking, and hanging out in a baseball diamond. At 6:30

AM, we were back on the steps when we heard the front door get unlocked. Trevor left and I went in and got ready for school. Not a word was said between my mother and me. Missing a good night's sleep and being out in the cold was enough consequence for me. I never missed the last bus again and learned my lesson.

One night Trevor was over when my Mom came home. She said that she wanted to speak to us privately. I was nervous and could feel my chest get tight. She turned to Trevor, "You two aren't having sexual relations are you?" she asked.

"Mom! How could you say that? How embarrassing!" I stammered. *Of course, we were having sex, but I wasn't about to admit that to her!* Later I asked Trevor again if we were being safe, and he reassured me that we were.

I became pregnant in the summer of 1977. I was just 13 years old. When I didn't get my period the first, second, or third month, I just brushed it off. Talk about being in denial. I was quite slim at the time, so it wasn't until about the fourth month that I started to show. I remember the first time my baby kicked. I didn't know what it was. I quickly hurried over to Trevor's house and told him to put his hand on my stomach. Sure enough after a few minutes he felt it too, except he said it was only gas. *Really?* I was in denial, but I wasn't stupid. He assured me, again, that there was no way I could possibly be pregnant. Obviously he was in denial as well.

Over the summer and into early fall, Trevor and I were together off and on. I was slowly starting to accept my pregnancy and was hiding it well. I sought out other boys and became promiscuous in a short time frame of about six weeks. I was trying to forget what was going on, was drinking and was introduced to smoking marijuana and hashish. It never occurred to me that I could be harming my unborn child as I was still hoping I

would wake up and the pregnancy would be a bad dream. The two boys I tried to commit to relationships got scared off when I told them I might be pregnant.

Understandably, not too many boys would want to get hooked up with a 13 year old pregnant girl, but I still felt the rejection. I was looking for love in all the wrong places.

I entered grade nine with a feeling of hopelessness and defeatism. I was feeling fat, unmotivated, tired and apprehensive about the future. I started skipping school and hanging out with Trevor at his place during the day, or walking the malls. He had already quit school so his place was an easy one to escape to. I had no interest in school, plus I knew I probably wouldn't be there much longer. In order to avoid getting the strap at school Trevor would call the school, pretend to be my uncle and have me excused for illness. It worked for a while until the principal called me in. He had the black leather strap ready when I walked in the door. Before he could tell me to sit down I looked him in the eye and said, "If you touch me with that thing, it will be the last thing you do. Do you remember my brother?" I knew to use my voice when I had to. He put the strap away and gave me a stern warning. Good thing, as I might have gone ballistic on him. I was determined not let a man do me harm, plus I was in emotional and hormonal turmoil at the time.

Come early October, my jeans were too small, I was borrowing pants from my brother, and looking much fatter in the girth. I knew for sure I was pregnant, but had no plan or idea for what I was going to do. I was still secretly hoping it would all just miraculously go away. My mother approached me one evening.

"Camela, I need to ask you something. Either you are pregnant or you are getting fat. Which one is it?" she asked while standing a little too close to me. I backed away.

“Well...I guess I am pregnant then,” I said half-jokingly. I wasn’t prepared for the verbal lashing that followed.

“I told you not to be having sex! You are only 13 years old. Your life is over! We need to get rid of this baby. How far along are you?” she yelled. My Mom was in panic mode. She was livid and probably in shock. She was just dealt a huge blow and every hope and dream she had for her daughter died right at that moment.

“I am getting out of here!” I screamed. I ran upstairs, grabbed a garbage bag and starting chucking any clothes I could find into the bag. I threw it over my shoulder and was heading out the door. To Trevor’s place? I didn’t even know.

“If you leave this house, you leave with dignity. No daughter of mine will leave this house with a garbage bag full of clothes. Now come and sit down and let’s talk this through,” my Mom said softly. I sat down and we cried together at the kitchen table. My Mom pushed back the tears as she shared how my life would be over if I kept the child. She said all of my dreams would be gone if I kept my baby. I listened carefully as this was one of the first times we had ever had such a deep conversation. I started thinking about the money I made as a nanny, the Sears homes I had designed, the new clothes that had bought, and I wondered if she was right. I felt that I would continue to live in poverty if I became a teenage mom. I knew that I had deeply hurt her and I felt ashamed.

My Mom decided that due to how far along I likely was, she needed to make immediate plans for me to have an abortion. She told me that I would need to leave my school immediately and start fresh in a new one. After an initial doctor’s exam and phone calls to doctors it was determined that I was too far along to consider an abortion.

At that point I didn't really care what happened, I was just glad the secret was out. I was agreeable to any plan that my Mom felt was best for me.

I left John Henderson Junior High in October of 1977, just before my 14th birthday. The principal could barely look at me on my last day of school. He looked sad and disappointed, and I thought he was going to cry. He tried to explain why I could no longer attend his school. He said that it would be too difficult for me to stay. I wondered who it would be more difficult for – me, the students or the school staff. Nonetheless, I felt ashamed and embarrassed. I didn't even have the chance to say goodbye to my peers. I felt so alone. I kept thinking of how things might have been different had I have kept my love of school alive the year before. How if I was more involved I might not have met Trevor. I longed for the days of playing basketball, eating fries and gravy at the local Zellers, and hanging out with my friends in the school yard. I quietly got up and walked out of the school, never looking back and never to return again. Life as I knew it was about to change drastically.

A Child Having a Child

My Mom surmised that because it was too late for an abortion, I would give the baby up for adoption. So that was the plan, I would continue school at an alternative program, and after I had given birth, give up the child and continue with my schooling. She didn't think to ask me how I felt or what I wanted. I was led to believe that I was considered a child having a child, and therefore my Mom needed to make the decisions for me. No one but me knew that once my baby started to kick, that I wanted to keep it. There was no question in my mind. When I was six months pregnant I learned how to knit in my arts and craft class, and upstairs in my bedroom, I started to secretly make a

baby blanket for what I thought would be my son. It was in navy, baby blue, and white colors. By the time my daughter was born, it was the size of a twin size blanket. I had split up with Trevor who, in a very short time, had gotten married and had another baby on the way. By the time my daughter was born, he was the father to four other children. He had been secretly seeing other teenage girls and obviously no one was using birth control.

At this time, my mother was 37 years old and was beginning to make her mark as an advocate for social justice. She was beginning the coursework to pursue her Bachelor of Arts in criminology from the University of Manitoba and then wanted to obtain her Bachelor of Social Work. She would joke and say that she might become a professional student and take forever completing her degrees, but she was resolved in her goals. Her time as a student inspired me. I could see how busy she was and yet she was a woman pursuing her

dreams. She would not give up hope and found ways to attain her goals even though it was difficult. Working full-time, raising four children and being a student was no easy feat, yet

she managed to do it. She became a founding member of the Elizabeth Fry Society of Winnipeg during this time in the late 1970s. She was working towards being a parole officer and was determined to be a probation officer with her new degree.



Once I got over being the youngest female in my school program at the YWCA, I quite enjoyed the day-to-day activities at the school. Between prenatal exercise class and crafts it was fun. I didn't partake in the baby classes because it was common knowledge that I was giving up my child. Wanting to keep my baby was yet another secret that I kept from others. Out of the 12 girls in the program, there were only two of us giving up our babies. Some girls were 18 years old and married, so there was quite a range of girls and circumstances that got them to the Y program or "prego school" as I called it. Although I gained 65 pounds in my pregnancy, many of our neighbors didn't even know I was pregnant. My Mom told me that it was best that no one knew I was pregnant, as I was giving the baby up anyways. That made perfect sense to me as I knew my Mom was trying to protect me from the pain and embarrassment of being pregnant at such a young age.

My days revolved around going to school every day, trying to eat healthy and not give in to the fries and gravy cravings, coming home to do chores, and keeping the household running. I had quit all drinking and drugs, although I did smoke during the pregnancy. Back then I didn't know that there could be birth defects from drinking during a pregnancy, but being in denial until the end of my fourth month wouldn't have prevented the alcohol or pot use anyway. I was down to one friend from junior high who stuck by me the whole time. I was getting excited about the prospect of having a little someone to love and who would love me back unconditionally.

My Mom and I thought that I had a week or more to go before the baby was due, so I encouraged her to attend a four day out of province conference which started on March 3, 1978. I had no idea when my last period was so the doctor's best guess at the

due date was March 15th. My Mom had her best friend lined up to drive me to the hospital should the baby decide to come early. Sure enough, my water broke on the morning of March 6th and I immediately called her friend to drive me to the hospital. My brother was home and I did not know where my older sister was to tell her the news. It was a surreal experience walking into the hospital scared and all alone. My mother was on the train and wouldn't arrive until almost midnight. I was in labor for 17 hours and the nurse who was sitting with me for four hours was getting me ready to go to the delivery room. She wished me luck – it was then that I realized that she was leaving to go home as her shift was over. I started to cry because I just comprehended that I would be alone while giving birth. Because of back surgery two years previous, I could not have an epidural, so I was in extreme pain with little drugs to dull the discomfort. My mother had only a chance to peek her head in as I was sobbing and being wheeled down the hospital corridor. I could hear my mother yelling, “Give her some drugs – what is wrong with you people?” She thought I was just crying out from the pain, but in actuality, I was sobbing because I was alone and terrified.

“Can you believe she is only 14 years old? She is just a child herself. Oh my God, how tragic!” the nurse said on the phone after I had given birth to a healthy 7 pound, 8 ounce perfect little baby girl. I wanted to yell at the nurse, *I can h-e-a-r you, you little bitch*, but instead I lay in the recovery bed weeping and trying very hard not to move. No sooner had I pushed my daughter out in the delivery room, they had her bound up in blankets and gone within a few minutes. I wondered how the experience would have been for a “real” mother, and not a child having a child.

“She is giving up this child for adoption. She is not to see it,” advised the doctor to the nurses, without even a backwards glance at me. So with those words my brown-haired daughter was whisked away. I quickly went into a deep state of sadness in the hospital. I wanted to see my baby and my sadness quickly turned into anger. *How dare they prevent me from seeing my own flesh and blood!* I left my private room and made my way down the hospital corridor yelling, “I just want to see my baby! I want to see her now! You can’t keep her from me! I want to talk to the doctor!”

I think I scared the nurses at the station, as I was pretty frantic at the time. After some quick deliberation they brought my baby in. She was beautiful. She was perfect. My Mom had brought me some red roses, and I took one and laid it down beside her on the bed, and then took some pictures. I looked to make sure she had all of her toes and fingers. I took off her diaper to make sure she was a girl and noticed her little patch of blue on her bottom. I would find out later that this was a sure sign she was my daughter with my Mohawk blood. I took about six pictures of my little angel as I figured it might be the only way I would ever see her, and I never wanted to forget her beautiful little face. She was unnamed and was simply “baby 586375.” I held her close to me as tears rolled down my already swollen cheeks. My moment was interrupted by the nurse who said my time was up. I reluctantly let her take my baby. When she left I continued to cry. I did not want to give up my baby. I had already been charged by the police with



having sex under age, so I thought that I wasn't allowed to keep my baby unless my Mom agreed (*my Mom was trying to teach Trevor a lesson by having him charged by the police. She was pursuing a charge of statutory rape, but found that she couldn't do this. She settled with him being charged with having sex with a minor, but in doing so, it meant that I too had to be charged*). My Mom didn't know at the time that I wanted to keep my daughter.

“Are you ready to sign the papers to relinquish your child?” the social worker asked me in the hospital the day after I had given birth.

“Umm. What does *relinquish* mean?” I asked, feeling embarrassed about not knowing what the word meant.

“Relinquish means to give up your child for adoption. To give her to another home with both a loving mother and father,” the social worker continued.

“Do I have to?” I asked, as tears fell down my face.

“What – of course not! You mean you want to keep your baby?” she asked with genuine concern mixed with shock on her face.

“Can I? I mean, am I allowed to?” I asked hopefully.

“Of course you can,” she responded with a slight smile on her face.

I was shocked. I really had no idea that I was *allowed* to keep my baby, because I was under age. I was so naïve at the time! The social worker explained that if for some reason my mother did not allow me and the baby to come home then we would be put in a foster home – together. She said the words that I needed to hear – that I wouldn't be separated from my baby. This was a huge relief to me. We chatted for a bit, and I was told that she would need to have a discussion with my mother. I told her that I thought

my Mom was going to say no to the idea. She assured me that if my Mom said no, she would be aware of the consequences, i.e., me moving away with the baby. My mother was probably already fully aware, as she was involved in social work herself. It is likely that Mom knew of all the options available to me, but did not share them because she thought she was doing the best for me at the time, and she thought I also wanted to give up the baby. What she forgot though is that she taught me to use my voice – to speak up and fight for what you believe in. I used my voice that day to tell someone that I wanted to keep my baby. I stood up to my Mom for the second time in my life. My Mom, by setting an example for me, taught me to use my voice and not to waver in my beliefs. Using my voice that day helped me to be stronger than I was the day before. You see, because now that I was a mother I wanted only the best for *my* daughter. I now had hopes and dreams for her, just as my mother had for me.

I went home from the hospital less than 48 hours after giving birth – without my baby girl. Usually women stayed in the hospital for a week back then. She was left at the hospital while the Children’s Aid Society gave my Mom the options available to me and her. I came home not knowing what my Mom was going to say, and she took her time to make her decision. I continued to be distressed and depressed. Now my milk was coming in, I was sore and I had no one to talk or cry to. I wasn’t eating or sleeping, and I cried incessantly. After about five days, my Mom came into my room to talk to me.

“Camela, I am worried about you. You aren’t sleeping, you haven’t eaten, and I can see how upset you are. I am worried you are going to kill yourself or something. Because of my concern and love for you, I am going to allow you to keep this baby,” she said. I couldn’t believe what I was hearing. It took everything for me not to jump on

her and hug her. Back in those days we rarely showed signs of affection like hugging, so instead I continued to look at the bed, and she saw me smile and draw a huge sigh of relief. I felt like I could breathe again.

“If you bring this baby here, there are a few things you need to know. First, I never want to know that there is a baby in this house. What I mean is that you need to keep the house clean of diapers and bottles and look after her every need. Don’t allow her to cry – and don’t use a damned soother. Do you understand?” she asked. I nodded.

“Second, you will continue to help me with the household chores,” she added. “If you are not going to school, you need to help around the house.”

I agreed to the conditions and I was ecstatic. My Mom said that she would need to look into getting a crib and clothes, and that it could take a few days. I begged her to let me bring my baby home from the hospital that moment, but she said it might take some time. When my daughter was ten days old I brought her home from the hospital. My Mom couldn’t afford a crib for her right away so I removed a drawer from my dresser, placed it on the floor beside my bed and lined it with the blue quilt I made her. That drawer became her new “crib” for a couple of months. We bought a box of used baby clothes, and my Mom hosted a baby shower so I could get other items for my daughter. Because I had been alienated from most of my friends, the people that came to the baby shower were my Mom’s friends, some of her colleagues, and neighbors. It was an exciting time, but also a stressful time of trying to juggle caring for a household, and being a new mother.

Tough Times for Everyone

Looking after a newborn and a sick mother was a lot for a 14 year old to take. Shortly after my daughter was brought home, my mother was diagnosed with rheumatoid arthritis and lupus (systemic lupus erythematosus), an auto immune disease that affected her lungs, and eventually took her life. I recall one night my Mom was so sick, she was having difficulty breathing, and was in tremendous pain. I told her that we should call 9-1-1, but she insisted that she should drive to the hospital herself. While keeled over in pain she started to think about what would happen to her car if she drove herself to the hospital. She came up with the idea that I should accompany her to the hospital and then drive her car back home. Reminding her that I was only 14 and didn't have my drivers' license did not deter her from her plan. So I asked my little sister to watch over my baby, called a friend to help, and we headed out to the emergency department of the Health Sciences Centre. My Mom insisted on going into the hospital alone and told me to drive home carefully. She surmised that because it was one o'clock in the morning that traffic would be light.

Mom looked me in the eye and between labored breaths said, "You will be fine. I trust you completely, my girl." As she turned away she warned me that her car better be in the same shape it is now.

My friend arrived and drove his car in front of me, and I used him as a guide to drive my Mom's big blue Pontiac home. I didn't get pulled over, but I learned that night what it meant to be a "white-knuckle" driver. I was glad that my Mom had given me a few impromptu driving lessons in her car when she had driven me out to the jails on the weekends. The highlight of visiting the Pen was that 15 minute span of being behind the

wheel of her car. I knew that my Mom trusted and had faith in me, and that is what helped to get me and her car home safely that night. My Mom was kept in the hospital at that time for two weeks, and was told later that her lungs were so damaged, that she could have been put on a lung transplant list. She was 38 years old, and in the prime of her life. She came home, and against doctor's orders resumed work right away. She had a fighting spirit and would not let the lupus or arthritis slow her down. She cut back on her weekend work, and spent many of the hours she wasn't working, resting. Her dream of getting her degree was put on hold while she focused on trying to deal with her disease.

Chapter VII

Branching out on my Own

Just the Two of Us

The next three years were spent working to support my daughter and myself. I briefly tried to return to school in my grade ten year, but felt completely estranged from my peers and the school itself. One of my jobs I had was cleaning a teacher's home for cash, and it didn't help that she was a teacher at my high school. After a few months I quit school, and that cleaning job.

When I was 15 years old, I found a job working at a tailor's shop in the North End, and this allowed me to secure an



My 1st Apartment in North Kildonan

apartment not far from my mother's house. I had to fib on the rental agreement to say that I was 16 years old; otherwise I couldn't have rented a place anywhere. I was very proud of my first apartment. My daughter slept in the bedroom, and I on the couch. I was making a decent wage back then of \$650.00/month and quite enjoyed dressing up and going to work every day. My two year old daughter quickly adjusted to her new day care center and only cried when she knew I was in the room. She was really quite a "mama's girl" and wanted me all to herself – like most toddlers do. At 16 years old I started working in a bridal salon. We moved downtown to be closer to my work, and at first it was a big adjustment being geographically further from my Mom for the first time in my life. During this time, my mother and I became quite close. I could really

appreciate the struggles my Mom had raising her four children as a single parent. Raising one child alone was difficult enough.

My mother shared many of her challenges that she was having at work. She talked about her struggles to adhere to her beliefs and values. The politics she would come up against in the criminal justice system drove her crazy. My mother wanted change to occur quickly and admitted she was not a patient woman. Although she enjoyed the field of social work, she thought that she could make more of an impact in the criminal justice field, which was a male dominated field. We had many chats about her work, her passions, and her illness. I was concerned about her disease and how hard she was working. My Mom was in a large amount of pain, but she kept her disease a secret from her peers at that time. She told me that she never wanted to be defined by her illness and would chuckle that if she pretended she didn't have it, maybe it would just go away. She hated that her disease showed up in her hands and that others could see the crippling effects of the rheumatoid arthritis. My Mom was always proud of her hands. Even with disfigured joints she would continue to keep her nails long and beautiful and was known for her exquisite collection of diamond rings.

I continued to work hard in my new job as a bridal consultant, and during this time Trevor and I semi-reconciled. At this time he had moved to the North End of Winnipeg with his wife and children and snuck out to see me whenever he could. I became his "mistress" but did not feel guilty at the time – perhaps it was because I was only 17 years old and didn't care about anyone else who might be involved. Trevor started to talk about leaving his wife and marrying me. I was quite content with just seeing him sporadically and allowing him to see my daughter on the odd occasion. I

loved my independence and not having to answer to anyone. I started to think of the ramifications of marrying him. My hopes and dreams for the future faded away when I thought of a life with him. Here I was trying to get out of the cycle of poverty so that my daughter could avoid it and he wanted to marry me? Why, so I could move into his rental in the North End, go on welfare and have more babies? Would I, as my mother predicted, get married and have three kids by the age of twenty if I remained with him? As much as we made a beautiful daughter together, I didn't care to have any more children with him. No thanks. I knew that I wanted more for me and my daughter, so I held him off the best I could.

It came to the point where Trevor would not take no for an answer. Today we would call it "stalking," but back in the early 1980s I called it just being obsessive. I was becoming scared of him and his increasingly aggressive tactics to see me. He would show up at my workplace unannounced, leap out of the stairwell at my apartment when he saw me coming, and be outside at my bus stop when I left for work. When an opportunity came up for me to visit a friend in another province I jumped at the chance. My Mom looked after my three year old daughter, and I set out for a week of fun with my girlfriend. When you least expect things, they happen. It was during that visit that I met my future husband. He was five years older than me, tall, good-looking, and it was love at first sight – for me anyways. I knew right away that I found my ticket out of Winnipeg and a life that was likely headed towards welfare and poverty if I continued to allow Trevor in my life. Within a few months I had asked for a lay-off, had my apartment packed up and was on the train headed west. I knew that my hopes and dreams were still alive in me, and that I was going to find a better life elsewhere. I said

my goodbyes to my Mom who, by this time had become quite close to my daughter who very much loved her Kokum. It was tough leaving but I knew I had to go. When I left Winnipeg in December of 1981, I never looked back. My mother understood that I needed to do what was best for me and my daughter and we vowed that we would come back to visit soon.

Just the Three of Us

Moving to a new province and only knowing one person was difficult, but I was determined to make it work. My new love, Tom, was not quite as interested in a serious relationship as I was, but he helped me to find a suitable basement suite for me and my daughter. My older sister moved out for a short while and we enjoyed our new lives as we searched for work and in a strange new city.

My first job was working at a local Aboriginal organization. I completed the application and hesitantly checked off “Aboriginal ancestry” on the page and waited. During my interview by the Aboriginal director, I was asked if I was an Indian. I was surprised at her question, but I told her my Mom was Mohawk and quickly pulled out a picture of her that I carried in my wallet. This seemed to be proof enough to her that indeed I was Aboriginal, and I got the reception position. My Mom was proud of me, but I was hesitant to apply for the position in the first place.

“Mom, I am not sure if I should apply for this position,” I mused.

“Why in the world wouldn’t you? You’ve been out of work for four months Cammy, and it’s a great Indian organization – how perfect!” she said.

“You see, that’s the problem Mom. I don’t *look* Indian. What if they don’t think I look or act Indian enough?” I wondered aloud.

“Cammy, if I have taught you nothing else, remember this. You are Indian and be proud of it. Hold your head high. And whenever you can play the Indian card – do it! We deserve it and we’ve been pushed around for too long. Now get out there and apply for that job!” she quipped. So with her words ringing in my head, I had applied and became the receptionist for the Indian and Metis Friendship Centre in a large urban city.

The job didn’t last for too long though. If I thought the director had hesitations about hiring me, well that was the tip of the iceberg. It seems that the other Aboriginal employees felt that management had erred and



mistakenly hired a White woman to represent them at the front of the building and on the phone. I could hear them argue about wanting a “real” Indian at the front desk and not a “wannabe”. They didn’t seem to care that I was Mohawk. The fact that I didn’t look Indian was enough to cause my co-workers to whisper, gossip, criticize and isolate me. My breaks were scheduled so that I was the only one in the lunch room, I was told that my wage would be lesser than what was advertised because I didn’t have reception experience, and I felt I was more or less treated like trash. After six weeks, I gave two weeks’ notice to quit. They responded by telling me that I didn’t need to give any notice and that I could leave right then and there, which I happily did. I think they were looking for a reason to let me go, so it worked out well for everyone.

When I was younger, my mother was the project manager at the Indian & Metis Friendship Centre in Winnipeg. Her children were a regular part of the Centre and

enjoyed helping out at bingos and accompanying her to work. The Aboriginal community knew us as “Debra’s daughters” and we were accepted as one of them. After the rejection I felt at my new job, I realized that it was because of my mother that I was accepted back in Winnipeg. She was respected and because of that so was I. I didn’t have her to fall back on in my new city, and I wouldn’t allow her to call the director to ream her out either (as she wanted to). I learned through that experience that by coming forward to share that you are Aboriginal does not always mean that you will be accepted by that community with open arms. I was only 18 years old at the time and wasn’t confident in using my voice. This was also one of the first times that I did share that I was Aboriginal since I was a child, and it seemed to have backfired on me. Although my Mom’s words encouraged me, it was a hard blow to be rejected by Aboriginal people working in an Aboriginal social service agency.

Things Get Serious

Well I guess I worked my magic with Tom, because he declared his love for me in September of 1982. We were engaged in January of 1984 and married in April of that year. My six year old daughter was a flower girl at our small wedding, and life was good. I reflected how I was the same age as my mother when she married my father. Somehow, even though my Mom had been through three failed marriages, I instinctively knew that Tom was the right one for me. He was a great father to my daughter, and we looked forward to having our own children together. My mother was excited about the marriage and said she had hoped that I could return to school one day. I told her that the only thing I wanted to do was to be a Mom. She said she understood and said that my time would come when I felt the need to be educated further. I wondered how she knew.

Two babies quickly followed in 1985 and 1986. We now had three daughters and life was busy. Due to Tom's work we travelled around western Canada until 1988 when we settled in a small, rural town in British Columbia. I finally had a house to call my own after renting for many years. I couldn't believe that I was a home owner at the age of 25. My Mom was so proud of me for "breaking the cycle" of poverty and becoming the first homeowner in her family. She was also excited at this time because she had recently regained her Indian status back from the government. She told me she now felt more "validated as an Indian woman" and we had a chuckle about how a status card could determine who was or wasn't an Indian. Being a stay at home mother was satisfying for a while, but as my Mom had predicted, I had a longing need to do something more.

Back in 1985 my husband had suggested that maybe I should consider getting my Grade 12 General Equivalency Diploma (GED). Tom brought our baby girl to the testing site where I nursed her in between one of the three hour tests. After seeing the results of my tests, I realized and remembered that I was smart. In 1986 when my youngest was a few months old I tried looking for a part-time job. I put out over 40 resumes over a one month period and wasn't receiving any call backs. Finally, I got a call from the Bay. I was being interviewed as a "candy girl." My job would consist of selling candies to people in the candy shop. I wondered how it came to be that I was applying to be a "candy girl" of all things. Some of my other jobs over the years were waitressing, teaching aerobic classes, and bridal sales – and now I would be dishing out

candy? I thought I better not be too picky, as I had put out 39 resumes with no other responses. I made a bet with Tom that if I couldn't qualify to be a darn candy girl, then I would go back to school. Even with a GED I was struggling with the job hunt. I have thought about what a blessing it was that I did not get that job. In time I was thankful that the manager saw that I was not the right person to dish out candy. It was not meant to be and it was a good thing.

Maybe my dream of being a teacher was attainable. My outlook was exciting and somewhat daunting. My

mother was over the moon when I told her I was thinking of going back to school. I was now on a mission to make my mother proud of me and for her to see that my dreams were still there.



Debra receives her Bachelor of Social Work degree at the age of 48 (1988) through the University of Manitoba

My Mom asked me what I wanted to do in school, and she would remind me of how I would need to consider how I might benefit my people. My Mom had received her Bachelor of Arts in 1982, her Bachelor of Social Work degree in 1988 and was already working towards a Master degree in Social Work Administration. I told her that I wanted to be a teacher and to change what and how things are taught in school, so that Aboriginal students would want to stay in school and have better success than what my

brother and I had. She encouraged me to consider social work, but I knew, just like my Mom, that I would want to bring those kids home with me and would find it difficult to leave work *at* work. She suggested working in the criminal justice field. She explained there needed to be more female Aboriginal voices in the jails and she thought I could excel in this area.

Debra was one of a few female leaders in this area and, at the time, was working on incorporating healing components as part of the programs offered in the jails for Aboriginal offenders. As much as us kids found it interesting (and may I say scary) that my Mom wouldn't think twice to bring us to a weekend Christmas event at the Headingly Correctional Centre or Stony Mountain Penitentiary, I felt I needed to protect my daughters from that kind of exposure. I did not want them to grow up any faster than they needed to, so I opted for a career in education where I *thought* I could leave my work separate from my home and personal life. When I reminded my Mom about her books that I would mark up in red pen and score with a big "A," she laughed and realized where my interests were. She agreed that I could make a difference with youngsters in the school just as she was with the "boys in the pen."

Chapter VIII

My Education Begins

Getting Centered

Going to school as a mature student was intimidating at first. I was 25 years old, had a two, three and an eleven year old daughter, and had been out of school for over ten years. I soon connected with other female students my age or older and began to relearn the process of what it meant to be a full-time student. At the time it seemed pretty normal to be a university student, a mother of three children and caring for a household. After all, that is what I grew up with and I admired my mother for it. I worked hard during the first two years of college to get the necessary coursework to pursue a Bachelor of Education degree. Many hours were spent in my make-shift office reading and writing papers on the typewriter. My youngest daughter who was just over two at the time would come in with her little pillow and blanket and make her bed on the floor so she could be close to me. My other girls would poke their head in and ask me if I wanted anything, and my husband would quietly sneak in a cup of coffee on my desk. It was hard, but I had a lot of support from my husband and ongoing encouragement from my Mom during those years.

When I was about to apply for the teaching program through Okanagan University College, I was advised by a university counselor to state that I was Aboriginal on the application, and to have a backup plan if I wasn't accepted into the program. I told her that I was not going to share that I was Aboriginal as I wanted to be treated fairly. With my past experience of being treated unfairly when others learned I was Aboriginal, I was not interested in being singled out. She seemed surprised at my

response and told me that they may have to hold a seat for me if they know that I am Native. I told her that I did not expect any special treatment and that I would get in on my own merit – my marks. She then informed me that she did not think that my B+ average was enough to land me in one of the 60 seats being offered. She told me that over 300 students apply for these seats and they only take the “cream of the crop.” Again, she asked for a backup plan. I didn’t think of failure as an option, so I told her that I would get a spot, and that I had hope that this would happen for me. I told her that I had been dreaming of being a teacher from almost before I started kindergarten, and that this will happen for me if it is meant to be. She didn’t seem convinced, but I left her office with only applying to the teaching program. I could hear my Mom’s words in the back of my head, saying *you can do anything you want to do*.

A short time later I was accepted into the teaching program, and I was ecstatic. I was proud that I hadn’t given up hope or used my Aboriginality to get me there. I was nervous about when to say or not say if I was Aboriginal because of the mixed messages I had received thus far in my young life. I never knew if it was a good thing or not to admit my true identity. I started university full-time in September of 1989, began teaching in 1993, and earned a Bachelor of Education degree with distinction the following year. I realized at this time that I was smart and capable and could do anything I wanted, just like my Mom told me. It was interesting that in all of my coursework and practicums we only had a one hour session on “teaching Aboriginal students.” I offered my experience about being in elementary school and others quickly decided that I must know everything there is to know about Aboriginal students and Aboriginal peoples across Canada. It was my first taste of being labeled “the expert” simply because I had

Aboriginal heritage. I found it annoying and surprising that as the lone Aboriginal student in my program, I was the “expert” on all things Aboriginal. I wondered how people could be so ignorant.

Debra’s Centre

During the time that I was pursuing my postsecondary education, my mother continued to make her mark in the field of both social work and criminology. She was a course instructor at Red River Community College, volunteered with the Native Brotherhood Organization and the Wi Chi Whey Wen Justice Committee. She was one of the founding board members for the Ma Mawi Wi Chi Itata Centre in



Winnipeg. The following is the philosophy of the Centre:

WHO WE ARE:

The Ma Mawi Wi Chi Itata Centre was established in 1984 by the Aboriginal community to serve the Aboriginal community living in Winnipeg. Since that time, we have worked to support families to better care for children by creating meaningful opportunities for community and family involvement. By focusing on the positives and building on individual strengths, we continue to help families learn and grow stronger together. Ma Mawi’s philosophy is rooted in the belief that the entire community has responsibility for the healthy development of future generations. We follow the principles within our name, “we all work together to help one another”. As such, a commitment to the growth and

development of the Aboriginal community underlies all of our program and service activities (Retrieved from http://mamawi.com/about_us.html).

This was one of the first organizations in Winnipeg to work with the child welfare system to allow Aboriginal social workers to liaison alongside non-Aboriginal social workers in Aboriginal homes. The small but enthusiastic group of volunteers worked tirelessly to advocate for Aboriginal families. At the time the Child and Family Services of Winnipeg was continuing to place Aboriginal children in non-Aboriginal homes based on quick judgments made by non-Aboriginal social workers. My mother and her small group of committee members created an “after hour service” where Aboriginal social workers would go out to homes to spend time with families who were in crisis. Debra became an after hour crisis worker on the weekends for two years, along with a handful of other workers determined to make a difference for Aboriginal families. Debra knew that sometimes a visit with a cup of tea and a listening ear could calm down an upset parent or deescalate a situation. She was seen as a “mother figure” to many of the young mothers with children. As Debra was in her 40s, she was listened to by the young parents and her words were taken as wisdom. Debra might have been considered an Elder in the urban Aboriginal community, and knew that she was making a difference by defusing a situation and preventing children from being removed from a family in turmoil.

Ma Mawi started out with half a dozen workers at the time and Debra was considered to be a “strong advocate for social justice who could see beyond the crisis and symptoms of rage” (D. Robinson, personal communication, July 8, 2010). After leaving the Native Clan organization, Debra worked for the Department of Labour as a

Program Monitor, and then landed back at Native Clan as a parole officer. She held that position for five years before becoming a probation officer with the Manitoba Government for 12 years. She had her sights set on working as a parole officer for the National Parole Board of Canada. I asked her why she wanted to do this as she had a comfortable job with the Manitoba provincial government. She said that she wanted to be a role model for other Aboriginal women, and she would be one of the first to hold that position. We chuckled about how we both wanted to “rule the world” one day and how we were both such high achievers. As Rulers, we would talk about the changes we would make in our organizations so that Aboriginal people would be treated with cultural respect, equity, and dignity.

Interesting Parallels

I am not sure that when I was a child, the school system was interested in knowing if students were of Aboriginal descent. Certainly the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples in 1993 helped to highlight the importance of appropriate educational resources towards Aboriginal students, among other things. Unfortunately, sometimes it gets assumed that *all* Aboriginal students come to school with deficits, and my children were the victims of this myth.

When my middle daughter entered kindergarten at our local elementary school, I was still attaining my undergraduate degree in education. The principal of the school was aware of this and was encouraging of my upcoming career. Perhaps because of this connection or his curiosity he felt it appropriate to inquire further about my Aboriginal background. I looked at this as an opportunity to share some of my cultural background

with another educator plus I wanted to be accommodating as I knew that he could be a job reference for me down the line.

“Wow, you are Aboriginal! You sure don’t look it. How much percentage are you? But now that you mention it, your oldest daughter does have darker skin. I guess it all came out in her, eh? Is her dad Aboriginal as well?” he asked as I was registering my younger daughter. I felt myself getting annoyed at his remarks. I did not want to prove who I was, or who my Mom was, and now who my daughter’s father might or might not be. *Who determines what skin color one must have in order to be considered a legitimate Aboriginal person? Why do non-Aboriginal people care so much?* Then I remembered that I could be speaking to a future boss, so I kept my tone friendly and even. He worked in the educational system where I planned to work. I started to see a conflict brewing between what he was saying and how I was feeling as an Aboriginal person who wanted to be a teacher. I gently explained that we were Mohawk and that my mother came from the Six Nations Reserve in Ontario. He and a couple of teachers were mesmerized by my words and excited that the small school now had their first two Aboriginal students. I walked away feeling singled out but also dismayed at the line of questioning about my family’s background. Over the years I have learned to be less defensive about questions about my ancestry. It does continue to surprise me how someone’s personal cultural identity is so interesting to other people in our society. My mother’s teachings of being respectful, listen and share out have helped a lot when others question me on my cultural authenticity.

My eldest daughter had always excelled at school and I explained to her teacher she was bright, capable, and a good student. I provided the new teacher with her report

cards and she seemed pleased at the high marks. My daughter who entered kindergarten, however, did not come with a report card. A few weeks of school had passed when she started to complain that she was missing her art lessons. She was quite the artist, so I could see why she would be upset. I asked her why she was missing art. She didn't know why she was pulled out of art class, and didn't know who the lady was she was seeing. I told her that I would find out.

"Your daughter is receiving learning assistance from Mrs. Smith. Unfortunately, the only time that works for Mrs. Smith is during our art block," the classroom teacher responded when I inquired at the end of the day. "Not to worry, she is a capable artist and she will do fine missing it. It's only twice a week," she added.

I was stunned. "She is receiving learning assistance? In kindergarten? What for?" I asked in disbelief. The answer that followed almost took my breath away.

"Well your daughter's registration form states that she is an Indian – or Native, sorry... so therefore she receives learning assistance as part of our district's program to target Aboriginal students," she stated while putting her hand on my shoulder. *Was it me or did she have a condescending tone?*

"But how do you know that she even needs extra help? She just started here less than a month ago?" I asked incredulously.

"Well we didn't know for sure, but the service is there so we might as well use it, right?" she said. I couldn't believe what I was hearing. Here was yet another example of stating that we are Aboriginal and it being used in a negative manner. How dare they label my daughter as special needs because she is Aboriginal!

I immediately went to the principal to inform him that my daughter would no longer be seeing Mrs. Smith. I assured him that my daughter was capable and did not need to be pulled out of her favorite subject just because she is Aboriginal. The principal assured me that there was no intent to harm, but informed me that I had the right to refuse this service. My daughter stopped being pulled out of class and continued in school with average marks.

At that time I needed to stand up and share my voice. If I kept quiet it would only be because I was thinking of myself and not wanting to ruffle any feathers at the school level. I was cognizant of the fact that the principal could be my boss one day, and wondered if my decision to speak out would work against me down the line. On the other hand, speaking up was for the benefit of my daughter and perhaps the principal might rethink how other Aboriginal students are being labeled because of their ancestry. I chose the latter and knew that I needed to continue using my voice for my people – my daughters – and myself. I didn't realize at the time that perhaps it was not the principal's choice to label my daughter. Likely he was following the district's directives to label Aboriginal students in kindergarten because these students brought in funding. I am glad that I used my voice, but remembered back to when my eldest daughter was in grade three in Alberta and I did not speak up. To this day I regret my lack of action and wish I would have done things differently.

Due to my husband's various job assignments during the first few years of our marriage, our eldest daughter was subject to changing schools frequently. She was having a hard time fitting in and was giving up on making new friends. I began to feel badly about this and we settled shortly thereafter. However, in her grade three year, she

changed schools twice. I had dropped her off at school late one day and she went to her classroom alone. When a child is in grade three it is not her fault she is late for school, and all the way to school I kept apologizing to her about my tardiness. Apparently the students and teachers were not in her classroom when she arrived. My daughter was too shy to go searching around the school for her class, so she just went to her desk and sat down and waited. When her teacher and classmates arrived back some thirty minutes later, the teacher demanded to know how long she had been sitting there.

“You are very late young lady. What is your excuse? How long have you been sitting there by yourself?” she demanded.

“I think for about half an hour,” my shy daughter said quietly with her eyes down.

“You are late and you need to report to the office immediately. I think you have deliberately missed class and I am not impressed,” she asserted firmly.

My daughter begrudgingly made her way to the office. It was the first time in her little life that she was sent to the principal’s office and she wasn’t sure why. It wasn’t long before I got a phone call from the principal, Mr. Rinkus, telling me that I needed to come to the school immediately. I quickly bundled up my two babies and went to the school. I was summoned to the principal’s office and those feelings came back to when I was last in my principal’s office in my grade nine year. I got a terrified feeling and could feel my heart thumping through my jacket.

“Your daughter was caught hiding in the classroom after you dropped her off. She was sent down to see me in the office. I only had to take one look at her from my office window to know that she was going to be trouble!” Mr. Rinkus screeched at me.

Mr. Rinkus looked at my eight year old brown-skinned daughter and determined she was trouble? I was abhorred at the blatant racism being directed towards my daughter – towards me. But instead of using my voice to put him in his place and complain to the school district, I withdrew my daughter from his school and put her in private school. I regret not using my voice that day and vowed that I would always speak up for my children, no matter how difficult or what the repercussions might be for me.

My children's school district had structural and procedural methods in place on how to try to meet the needs of Aboriginal students back in the 1990s. I believe it was racist to pre-label Aboriginal students as requiring extra support before they were even met or assessed. I thought it was an isolated incident within the school district. It saddened me to learn that the same procedures were being followed in other districts around the province. In the 14 years since my daughter started kindergarten it seemed that little had changed in how Aboriginal students were being treated in the school system. I thought about how change could be made, so I decided to continue my education and complete my Master's Degree in administrative leadership. I figured after ten years of teaching or so, I might explore administration as an option. My prediction was correct. At a certain point in my career I decided that making changes in the classroom for one child at a time, was not enough. I felt that I needed to try to make more substantive changes at a school level. This revelation came about seven years after entering my teaching career.

My mother and I had an interesting discussion on what had occurred with my daughter entering kindergarten and being labeled. Her argument was that it was high

time that the government and school system address the needs of Aboriginal students and give them extra support if they needed it. I agreed, however I did not feel it was correct to pre-label children before they were even met. Simply noting that a student's ancestry is Aboriginal does not give a district, school, or teacher the right to prejudge their learning abilities, personality, or their parent's interest or disinterest in their schooling. I cannot think of anything more racist as to label a child needing remedial support simply because a box on a registration form is checked off. It is no wonder that many Aboriginal families choose not to disclose their child's identity when they enter school. They do not want their child being treated differently because of their ancestry. That is why I chose to keep my Aboriginal status a secret when I was a child. Is it fair or stereotyping to say that an Asian student will be smarter than the average student? A Black student will be good on the basketball team? We would never make these assumptions, yet the colonialist views prevail that Aboriginal students are coming into the school system with deficits. After hearing my concerns, my Mom told me that I was going to make a difference for Aboriginal students and she encouraged me to keep advocating for students just as she was advocating for Aboriginal families and inmates in the jail system. Unfortunately, that incident was the first of many acts of racism my children would endure in their lives.

The Name Calling Returns

When my children were in elementary school two of our close neighbors learned that I was Aboriginal. It is not that I was keeping this a secret anymore, but I didn't have it advertised on the front lawn either. We were cordial with our new neighbors at the time, but not friends. One day the neighbor's dog came onto our property, attacked and

killed our Siamese cat in our backyard. The neighbor's denial of the situation, even though there were witnesses led to some choice words being shared by both sides. I was shut up pretty fast when the neighbor called me a *Dirty Squaw* and told me to *Go back where I came from*. I immediately went inside our newly built house and had to catch my breath and breathe. I started to wonder how she knew I was Aboriginal and what I planned to do about her racist words. I then realized that her children went to school with my daughters who likely shared that they were Mohawk. I too, was raising my daughters to be proud of being Aboriginal, so it made sense.

I found myself feeling like the bullied victim from years ago. It is interesting how your past can come to the present with just a few words. I called my Mom and shared with her what had happened. She suggested I call the police and reminded me that racist remarks are against the law. With her being a parole officer I should have reasoned that she would suggest the police and charging the neighbors. I did call the police but learned that unless the police witnessed it, or we could get it on videotape, there was nothing they could do except sympathize with us. The next few years were a nightmare for me and my family. When we went out in our backyard and if the neighbors or their children were out on their deck, they would call us names until we went back inside. Unfortunately, another set of neighbors who were friends with these people would join in if they were outside as well. So we had racial slurs coming from the house beside and the house behind ours. I couldn't believe that this was happening in our day and age in a usually quiet, middle-class neighborhood. It was a time that my spirit endured many wounds, and sometimes I hated coming home not knowing what to

expect. Thank God for air conditioning in the summer as I stayed inside more than I should have.

I had to make a difficult decision. I told my husband that we needed to move or I would take the girls and leave. Up until that point Tom downplayed how serious the situation really was. It made sense that he wasn't as affected because he wasn't the one who the slurs were intended for. He could happily be outside tending to the yard and never hear a word from the neighbors. They had found their target in me and my girls. We had many discussions and arguments during those tumultuous five years, and we ended up coming to a decision that broke my heart but ultimately began to mend my spirit. We put our lovely lake view home up for sale and celebrated when it sold a few months later. It was during this time that my daughters experienced what it was like to be treated poorly because you are Aboriginal. My blonde-haired daughters were confused but angry that this was happening to our family, literally in our own backyard. I shared with my daughters that I had been bullied as a young girl and made them promise me that if anything like that would ever happen to them that they needed to tell me right away. My daughters shared that they were being called names by the same neighborhood boys at school as well. I immediately went to the principal and he assured me that the boys would not bother my girls anymore. I explained to my daughters that some people are racist and will judge you not by who you are on the inside, but what your family ancestry is. I felt sad having to have this conversation with my girls, but knew that my story was important for them to hear.

When my youngest daughter was in grade three, she came home from school and said she wanted to talk to me. She was hesitant and then told me what happened at school that day.

“Mom, my teacher was doing spelling today and we learned how to spell the word ‘arithmetic,’ she started out. “It’s the *way* Mrs. Panask told us how to remember spelling it that makes me feel funny inside,” she said.

“Oh, how would that be?” I inquired. I was now all ears because I was a first year teacher and thought I might learn a new teaching trick for my class.

“Well, it was something like A is for “a,” R is for “red,” I is for “Indian,” and something about chewing or eating tobacco,” she said quietly. “I was embarrassed when she told the class that riddle.”

She said that she stopped listening to Mrs. Panask and just put her head down on the desk. She asked me why the teacher would say “Indian” and not “Aboriginal?” I didn’t know what to say. I was surprised that the teacher was sharing this inappropriate mnemonic strategy when there were others like, “A Rat In The Hat May Eat The Ice Cream.” I told my daughter that I would speak to her teacher.

When I addressed Mrs. Panask on what she did and shared how my daughter felt, she was stunned. I believed her when she said that she had no intention of embarrassing my daughter and had not even thought twice about the spelling strategy she had used for years. She also wasn’t aware that my daughter was Mohawk as she didn’t look the way an Aboriginal student *normally* looks, I was informed. We had a good chat about how proud my daughters are to be Mohawk, how close they are with their Kokum, and how as teachers we need to ensure that we are giving positive and appropriate messages to

both our Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students in our classes. She later sent me a card and thanked me for approaching her in a non-confrontational manner, said she learned a lot, and vowed that she would be more cognizant of her language and teaching strategies in the future. I knew at that time I could make a difference for both students as well as teachers.

When that incident occurred, my daughter was only eight years old and in grade three. When a similar episode came up for her when she was in grade ten she had the courage to stand up in front of her peers to address and respectfully correct her teacher. A teacher telling a class of 30 science students that it was a myth that Aboriginal people cared for the environment did not sit well with my daughter. When she spoke up her Métis friend joined in and supported her. Both my Mom and I were very proud of my daughter for using her voice in the classroom that day. My daughter used her voice to inform and give a perspective from a Mohawk point of view. She did it in such a way as to share her truth and knowledge without being rude or disrespectful of her teacher's opinion. My mother's teachings had filtered down through the generations and I was pleased.

Chapter IX

The Leadership Journey Begins

1995 – 2001

Keeping your dreams alive are important as they can pull you out of the dark and give you renewed hope for something better in the future. In the fall of 1995 we began to build our dream house, we were moving out of a toxic living environment with racist neighbors, and I had been given my first continuing contract as a teacher. I started looking into the leadership opportunities I had available through my district and provincial union. My mother had also met her goal on September 19, 1995 – she was appointed to the National Parole Board of Canada, and assigned to the prairie regional division as a full-time member. The move meant that she would have to leave the comforts of Winnipeg and all of her friends and colleagues, so when the time came she was hesitant. She wasn't sure of the move to Saskatchewan, because she felt she was making a difference in her present role as a probation officer for the Manitoba government.

We spoke at length about her new position and what it meant to her. Debra had definitely impacted the field of corrections in a positive way and she had seen many of her initiatives come to fruition. She continued her quest to make life better for inmates in the jails, and was instrumental in her commitment to have Aboriginal cultural healing programs be a part of correctional institutions. In Manitoba alone over one-half of the people incarcerated were of Aboriginal descent, and Debra was helping to fight for their rights for cultural models of healing for both the inmates and their victims. Through

discussion with her clients Debra had become aware that due to the high cost of the Greyhound bus, the lack of transportation and the fuel costs, many inmates were not being visited. She knew the importance of family connections within Aboriginal communities, and how inmates needed to see their children and families so that they could maintain hope and find a reason to improve and heal. Debra had implemented a bus program for the families so they would only have to pay a minimal fee to visit their sons, husbands, brothers and dads at Stony Mountain Pen. She would personally drive the families to the two local jails so her clients could have a visit from a loved one. Her volunteer work as a member of the Healing Lodge Committee, Citizens Advisory Committee, and Ikwewak Justice Society of Winnipeg helped many male and female inmates through Debra's hard work and perseverance. My Mom ultimately felt that she would find her niche in Saskatoon, and packed her belongings up after living in and advocating for social justice in Winnipeg for 29 years.

My Mom was a highly respected probation officer for many years and had made many contacts through Aboriginal social service agencies. Debra was a mentor for many new people entering the field of criminal justice and encouraged young people to “give back” to their communities by volunteering. One such person was Clayton Sandy who started off as a young 19 year old Aboriginal pow-wow dancer, and



**Debra speaking out on Aboriginal issues.
(Circa 1970s)**

is now the Board Chair for the Native Clan Organization some forty years later. Debra was a founding board member of Native Clan back in the early 1970s and her mission was to improve the lives of inmates in the jails. The vision statement of the Native Clan Organization reads:

Under a volunteer Board of Directors and dedicated staff, the Native Clan Organization, Inc. has been successful in establishing a rehabilitative network, which has addressed the needs of thousands of offenders, both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal. The Native Clan strives to continue this commitment not only for the benefit of the offender and his/her family but also for society as a whole (Retrieved from <http://www.nativeclan.org/nc/>).

Clayton describes Debra as “having a lot of uphill battles” just being an Aboriginal outspoken female in a male dominated field, but was “a change maker who was ahead of her time” (C. Sandy, personal communication, July 9, 2010). He states that he now mentors young people and credits Debra for helping him learn the value of giving back when he was younger. My Mom was able to mentor others to give to give back and they in turn continued the cycle of reciprocity.

Leadership through the British Columbia Teachers' Federation

Ultimately I found my calling through being an Aboriginal associate with the BCTF in 1997 while conducting workshops around the province of British Columbia for teachers, educators and community members. I was elected as an Aboriginal Education Advisory Committee member in 2001. While meeting people all over the province, I heard a lot of stories from both parents and teachers on how the educational system is either failing Aboriginal students or how Aboriginal parents are not doing enough to

help their children. I was a part of some lively debates on whether mostly non-Aboriginal teachers should or should not be teaching Aboriginal curriculum in the schools.

Teaching Aboriginal content is an interesting challenge that many teachers grapple with. My stance is that because we have less than 1% of Aboriginal teachers teaching our students, we must rely on non-Aboriginal teachers to implement programs and teach the Aboriginal learning outcomes that are part of the provincial curriculum. The discussion then falls along ensuring that teachers are being respectful, accurate and reflective of Aboriginal peoples' histories and cultures. Some teachers like my daughter's high school science teacher used information and twisted it to report out inaccuracies about Aboriginal people to his students. Many students would take a teacher's word as gospel, so it is important to ensure that the information is true and shared in a way that is thoughtful. I would remind other teachers at my workshops that you never know which of their students is Aboriginal. Like me they could be the blonde, fair-skinned student who you would never think to have Aboriginal linkage. I would also share that just because a student declares they are Aboriginal (which many do not) it is not fair to single them out as the "experts" in school. It is not only embarrassing to the student; it puts them in a place where they *think* they should know everything. This can lead to an inferiority complex of being expected to know it all, when of course you don't. It also suggests that Aboriginal peoples, histories, and cultures are all the same and devalues the uniqueness of all nations. It is certainly unfair to assume that all Aboriginal students are coming into the school with deficits. At the time of doing these workshops, I thought I knew a lot about Aboriginal students in the system. In retrospect,

I believe I was overconfident and arrogant to think that without actually immersing myself in a school with a large amount of Aboriginal students and parents that I could be the messenger and “expert” of such information.

I had just returned from conducting a workshop in the interior of British Columbia, and another colleague and I were chatting about it in our school’s staff room. A teacher-on-call was sitting close by and overheard me speak about the Aboriginal educators that came to the workshop. My colleague left the table and the teacher turned to ask me why it is that Aboriginal parents do not care about their children’s education. I noticed another teacher friend smile at me and rub her hands together in anticipation of my answer.

“Can you explain what you mean by that?” I asked her pointedly.

“Well, I know that I am just a new teacher, but it seems to me that Native parents don’t care about their kids’ education, and I think that’s a shame. Why do you think that is?” she asked innocently.

I could see by the look on her face that she really, truly believed this stereotype about Aboriginal parents in the school system. I asked her to continue sharing and I listened to learn more about her perspective. I knew that there would be better understanding if I was non-confrontational and came from a place of caring, concern and inquiry. I wanted to share my perspective with her in a way that would inform, not blame or judge. We talked until the bell went about perceptions, inaccuracies, and myths. I shared with her that I was Mohawk and how both my mother and I have been a part of our children’ education in perhaps more discreet ways than joining a Parents’ Advisory Council or the like. Assisting with homework at home, teaching a strong work

ethic, promoting regular attendance, and discussing the day's activities are important ways of showing children that school is an important part of their life. I also explained to her about the intergenerational effects of residential schooling and how sometimes even the smell of a school or seeing a person in authority within the building can cause anxiety for some parents. *I said this because I read it to be true. I would find out years later how true it actually was.* She left the conversation perhaps a little more enlightened and I knew that through continued dialogue I could indeed make a difference one teacher at a time.

Back in my early days of teaching I had little experience teaching Aboriginal students. However, I would present at workshops and conferences and speak to audiences as if I had. I had conducted a lot of research throughout the years and had plenty of conversations with my mother on how I can lead for change within an educational setting. I had empathy for teachers who shared their feelings of uneasiness in teaching Aboriginal curriculum, so I would work with other Aboriginal educators to help make teachers feel more at ease. I could share all of the good reasons it was important to teach Aboriginal pedagogy to both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students, and indeed wrote curriculum for teachers to assist them. The reality was that I had never taught more than one or two Aboriginal students in my classes in all the years of teaching. The schools I was in were all middle-class type of schools and many of the Aboriginal students were “on the other side of the tracks.” I was longing to find a way to really work with Aboriginal students and their families and experience the issues and situations first-hand instead of just reading about it in a book. Transferring schools was not an easy task, but I have to admit that I was fairly complacent working in my school

with very few minority students. I was happy teaching in my new school and conducting workshops. I thought I had found my own niche being a teacher leader, but started to feel the change bug hit me again.

Paradoxes: Learning through Mom's Suffering

From 1995 to 2000, I was travelling to Saskatoon to visit my mother three or four times a year. I would spend between one to four weeks at a time depending on the time of year. My mother's health was getting worse, and she was in tremendous pain. She was at her new job only for about a year when she realized the terrible mistake she had made in moving from Winnipeg. She was lonely and would blame the move on her declining health. My younger sister was living in the city and appreciated the reprieve she would receive when I came to help with Mom's care. My mother would insist on working even through her arthritis and lupus flare ups and limited movement. It would sometimes take her two hours to get out of the house in the morning. She would wake up and take her

medication, wait for it to start to relieve the pain, dressed, and ate, and then be exhausted and ready to go back to bed.

My Mom and I spent many visits talking about her past. Her pain would keep her in bed



My Auntie Ginny about to enter the Mush hole after leaving 48 years prior

during the weekends and so we used this time to catch up on my news and she would share her life with me. I was older and wiser now and was very eager to hear and learn from her stories. She would share how life was on the reserve and how she missed the days on the farm. She told me that she was one of the lucky ones who did not have to go to the residential school. With the exception of her older sibling, all three younger siblings attended the Mush hole. All of them experienced horrid physical, sexual and emotional abuse at the hands of Anglican priests. Debra wrote the following in her unfinished autobiography:

Up until I was 12 yrs. we were all at home, then for some unknown reason the other children were sent to The Mohawk Institute. Even now as I look back I cannot figure out why – sure we were poor, but being farmers, we always had enough. Right or wrong, I think it was because Mother nor Dad wanted the responsibility of the children anymore (D. Black, journal excerpt, 1982).

My Mom shared that when all of her siblings left, life became intolerable on the reserve. Her father passed away and her mother became an alcoholic. When the siblings came home they no longer spoke Mohawk, and Debra felt alienated from them. Her mother started to come and go from home, was drinking heavily and she had no one left on the reserve except for a few other kids her age or older. She said that she didn't think she was taken to the Mush hole because she was too old and couldn't be "brainwashed" to be a White kid. Looking back now I find it interesting and sad that my Mom put some of the blame on her parents for her siblings going to residential school. We know that Indian Agents sanctioned from Indian and Northern Affairs were on a mission to take children from their homes in an attempt to assimilate them into the Euro-Canadian

society. My mother shared how pleased she was that her younger sister came to stay with her in Fort Simpson and then in Winnipeg when she left the Mush hole. My Mom and my auntie remained close until Debra's death in 2001.

The last years I spent with my mother were times I will never forget. She would share stories about how she would deal with non-Aboriginal employers, social workers, and the bureaucracy within the criminal justice system. She would remind me to remember our important Mohawk value of being respectful of others, listen well when they shared their perspective, share once you recognize the need to do so, and be thankful of the Creator's gifts including learning from others. She would sometimes suggest that all the stress she endured in her work might have caused her illness. My mother would admit that she struggled to find balance in her life and may have worked too hard when she should have been taking better care of herself. She advised me to find balance like in the medicine wheel to all aspects of my life: spiritual, emotional, physical and intellectual. When my mother had to go on full-time oxygen, she knew it was time to leave the work in the jails that she loved, and she knew that this would break her spirit if she let it. She was taken away far too soon and had many, many more gifts to share. I am fortunate that I had her for my 37 years and the teachings she shared with me during those years continue to resonate with me as I began my new career in administration in the year 2004.

2004 – 2006

When I received the phone call that I was assigned a vice-principalship, I jumped for joy. I looked up to the heavens and smiled. I knew my Mom was smiling down on me. I had waited until my youngest daughter had graduated before I journeyed into

administration because I knew that I would need to devote 100% of my efforts into my work, and I did not want to have to juggle being a Mom with kids at home, and being a new administrator. Family obligations can keep female teachers from entering administration, and I chose to wait because I did not want to be torn between my family and my work (Sanchez & Thornton, 2010). Knowing I had my Mom's genes I deduced I would be placing my heart and soul into my new career. I was also fortunate to have a loving partner by my side to encourage me. Like my mother's job, I had to move to another city and sell our dream home that we had lived in for eight years. Tom was very supportive of my career and had encouraged me along the way. He knew that I was passionate about Aboriginal education and thought it was remarkable that his wife, who started off in the marriage with a grade nine education, now had her Master of Education degree and was heading towards a principalship.

My first administrative assignment included teaching full-time in a classroom. This was my first taste of teaching more than just one or two Aboriginal students at a time. I had eight Aboriginal students in my primary classroom and as an administrator I was now in the role of dealing with all of the parents of an inner city school, not just those in my classroom. I was eager to work hard and make my name known in a new city and new district. I had never worked in an inner city school and it took me a couple of months to adjust to the new culture of the school.

The school that I had come from was middle-class with few behavior problems. Most of the families were two parent families and I received much support from the families. The school was located in a sleepy, semi-rural area near a large city. My new school was located in a large urban center in an area of town that was common for

homeless people, with many rentals, housing projects and immigrants. I quickly learned what a real inner city elementary school consisted of. Watching movies like “*To Sir with Love,*” or “*Dangerous Minds*” isn’t quite the same as experiencing it first-hand. Many of the families that attended my school were living in poverty. About half of the parents of my students were single and some suffered from addictions. Many of our students did not come to school with indicators of school readiness and as such had weak language and motor skills, poor diets, were lethargic or were impulsive and could not focus. Many children came to school hungry, and so we offered a breakfast and lunch program. I did not know that the government provided funds for such a purpose and I was glad that they did. My first school even had laundry facilities to wash student’s clothing and outfit them with gently used, clean clothes. Some of our parents were illiterate or did not know English well and could not assist their children with homework or reading. Several home situations were so chaotic that there would not have been a place to work anyways. Many of my Aboriginal students had high absences because the parents could not find ways to get them to school. I was initially shocked when I came to my new school, but was excited to learn new things and to work with a different kind of student than what I was used to. I felt that I was up for the challenge.

As a workshop presenter on Aboriginal education and an advisory member with the BCTF up until my vice-principalship appointment, I felt that I had some skills and knowledge to share with my new district colleagues. Because I was no longer in the teachers’ union, I had to give up my position with the BCTF, and this was difficult. Perhaps it was because the principal I was working with was new, I cannot say for sure, but some district opportunities were denied to me by him that could have provided me

leadership opportunities in Aboriginal education. He was eager as well to make his name known to his new school and community, and wanted me working at the school level and not on district committees that would take me out of the school. I wondered how I could be involved in the district and share my cultural and book knowledge if I was only doing things at the school level. I longed to work with adults and continue to share my message. I felt that as a newcomer to a district that I was told rarely allowed in “outsiders,” I was gently but firmly being put “in my place” by a district insider. I was quickly adjusting not only to the climate of my new school, but the climate in my new district. I knew that there was much for me to learn about why my first few months in my new leadership position were feeling so unfulfilled and stifling. I knew that at some point the lessons I was learning would be revealed. I wondered how long that revealing might take. I began to write regularly in my journal and reflected on how and why I was feeling the way I was.

It did not take me long to realize that what my daughter had been subjected to 14 years previously was still occurring in school districts. Students who entered the district’s Aboriginal full day kindergarten program were immediately labeled needing English as a Second Dialect services which falls under the school’s special education budget. Before the students were ever met or assessed they were labeled needing remedial assistance. After I got over my initial shock, I asked my principal why this worked in this way. He shared that in his experience, Aboriginal students did require additional services and because the school had a full day kindergarten program, the students would be funded a full-time. I started to see that it was a funding issue and learned later that these funds can be used for other special education services as well. He

informed me that this was how the school district operated. I took some time to think about this and made an appointment to speak to the person in charge of the program. I clearly let her know that I found the practice to be racist and explained my history with this and how it can affect and label children. She appreciated me sharing my thoughts with her and said that my words gave her a new perspective. Although the district policy changed the following year to not label students until they have been fully assessed (grade one), the district has since resorted back to allowing children to be labeled in their first month in kindergarten. The Aboriginal voice was heard, but only for a short time. As the paperwork needs to be in a few days before the end of September, I do not believe that accurate assessments can be made on children who have only been in school for two to three weeks and who have likely had only one assessment done by a person who is not their classroom teacher. As the procedures within the system has not changed, I ensure that Aboriginal students in my school are not assessed until grade one. The district gives each principal the autonomy to choose either kindergarten or grade one for service to begin (if need be) and I have shared with other administrators on why I feel it is important to wait to assess students in a more formative manner.

Shortly after being hired I had a discussion with a teacher who had worked at the school for a few years. She asked me who I knew in the district that would have helped me to get hired on. She explained that she had a couple of “very capable” colleagues who had been trying to attain a vice-principalship position for several years, and they could not even get in for an interview. I thought there was more to her question and so I informed her although I knew one principal personally, I did not use his name on my resume. Her next response startled me.

“Well you know that there is rumor going around the district on why you got hired. I was told that the *only* reason you were hired is because you were Aboriginal,” she stated. My heart skipped a beat. *What is she talking about?* I found it to be one of the most racist remarks ever said directly to my face, and yet said in such a sweet way. I found the words that I needed to share out at that moment.

“I believe I was hired first and foremost because of my experience and my credentials. I came to this district to be a principal. Not an Aboriginal principal, but a principal who happens to be Aboriginal. I am an educational leader for all students but have a passion for the equity and success of Aboriginal learners.” I was not sure what else to say and wondered what the real intent of her disclosure was.

I wondered if my credentials were being questioned as this can be a challenge for Aboriginal educators, particularly if they attend teacher training in programs that are distinctly for people with Aboriginal heritage. I did not attend a program such as the British Columbia’s Native Indian Teachers Program (NITEP), the Saskatchewan Urban Native Teacher Education Program (SUNTEP), or the Yukon Native Teacher Education Program (YNTEP). Had I lived in closer proximity to any of these Canadian teacher training programs I would have been honored to attend. Instead I went to a regular university program where both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal teachers could apply, and had consciously chosen not to admit my Mohawkness.

After further thought I felt I would really have to prove myself in this new environment, not only to my principal, but to my new staff. In my past district I had earned respect and was known for my integrity amongst my principal, teaching and BCTF colleagues, and parent community. I was unsure what I thought about this new

district where I couldn't help but feel I was being silenced by not being able to pursue district committees or initiatives. Perhaps the district thought of me as the token Indian who was hired to fill a mandate, but not to make change? I wondered if what the teacher said was true. I had to brush it off because if I dwelled on it, I would become distracted from my goals. I learned from my journal reflections in September that my passion for Aboriginal education would need to be centered in my classroom, with my school's parents, and with the teachers in my school. I focused my energies on where I could make a positive difference and feel fulfilled at the same time.

That first year working in an inner city school was a rude awakening for me that triggered past memories. I learned and remembered first-hand, how the impact of poverty can and does affect children in school. This school offered a food and clothing program for the students in need, and the families only paid for the hot lunches if they could afford it. I thought back to the days of going to school hungry and wondered if a food program might have made a difference for me. I then remembered how prideful my Mom was and realized she never would have allowed us to receive free food. It gave me a great feeling to know that students were getting breakfast so they could be more open to learn. With some of the children's chaotic home lives it reminded me that school might be their sanctuary, as mine was when I was a youngster. I knew that I would never raise my voice to a student as they might be as connected to me as I was to Mr. Chan. I had no right to speak to a child with disrespect or sarcasm and was happy to see my students attend school with smiling faces. My students might have been living in poverty, but most were happy to be at school and enjoyed learning. I slowly adapted to my new grueling schedule of 11 hour days and weekend work. I was not prepared for

how the extra stress in my life would affect me. Not only was I living in a new, unfamiliar city, adjusting to a new district, learning a new role, and juggling a classroom in an inner city school, I was also living in a small condominium with my husband and two pets, and very much missing my daughters who opted to all stay behind in the community I was dearly missing. In my journal I wrote the following passage that sums up how I was feeling on November 30, 2004:

Depressed

Gained 5 lbs

Head cold

Tired

Feeling burned out

Want to give up

Want to cry

Have cried

Tired

Tired

Tired.

It didn't take long before my health started to be affected. My scoliosis started to act up and I was in extreme pain in my sacroiliac joint. I sometimes could not get out of bed or up off a chair without screaming out in pain. At home my husband had to help me stand up at the end of a day. In the classroom I could no longer bend over to help the students do their work at their desks. I ended up seeing a specialist who prescribed me narcotics which only took the edge off the pain. I wondered if that was how my mother

felt and why her health had deteriorated. The coincidences were eerie and I was determined not to get sick like my mother did.

The staff at this school was the first to help to “train” me as a new leader. I was impressed by many teachers’ work ethic and desire to do their best for their students. Although many teachers had high expectations for their students, some shared that they thought because many of the students came from impoverished backgrounds that they should be given a “break” and not pushed too hard. At this point, I began to look at research into successful schools that had a high population of Aboriginal students. I found that in my free time I was researching on-line and reading about students at risk. About 25% of the students at that school were of Aboriginal descent, and many were living at or below the poverty line. The students at my first school taught me as much as the teachers did. They showed me that it doesn’t matter what kind of background they have, they still loved school and wanted to learn. Every day my students reminded me that I meant a lot to them, as they did to me, and that my job was to ensure that they had the best education I could provide.

As the year progressed I came to better understand my new principal and learned how important it was to be true to yourself and not allow others’ values to change who you are. I knew that in order to make true change, I needed to be in a working environment where I was free to lead in my own way. I did what I could that year to help my principal “shine” and worked harder than I ever have at a school. I felt that I needed to be acknowledged on my own merits. I knew that I required further education so that when I spoke, my words would be that of cultural wisdom, combined with book knowledge. In a society based on colonialism, that piece of paper, that degree, is more

highly valued than the Aboriginal voice, so I knew I had to continue my education if I wanted to make a difference. The reputation of the local university, and my intense first year as a new administrator spiked my interest in pursuing a doctorate. In March I had made a decision to either, a) resign from the current administrative role and return to my previous district, b) ask to be transferred to another school, or, c) start a Ph.D. program. Either way I knew that I was not living a balanced life and my body was clearly showing me I needed to make some changes.

I applied to the Ph.D. program at the University of Victoria and held my breath. I reasoned if I was accepted then I would ask for an educational leave from work. I was feeling somewhat self-conscious because of the length of time I had been a student and wondered if I would be accepted to a doctoral program. I also wondered if I would be allowed a leave after only being an administrator for one year. Much to my delight, I was not only accepted by the university, I was awarded a fellowship to attend my first year. I quickly accepted the offer and then asked for an educational leave from work, which was granted without question. It was a lot easier to ask for the leave knowing that I was given a fellowship – how could the district say no to that? Even if my leave would have been denied, I was technically still on leave from my first district. I was strategic enough to plan that out but knew that ultimately I wanted to be in administration. The good news was that I felt that more post-secondary coursework would be “the golden ticket” for me in my new leadership career. By the end of June I had cortisone shot in my back and within two days was feeling 100% and pain-free. I have not had any pain in six years and am thankful for that. I wished that my Mom’s pain could have been taken away as easily as mine.

My 2005-06 year as a doctoral student and the ten courses that I completed in that 12 month period was the most difficult coursework I had ever pursued. I went from breezing through a two year masters course, nine years previously, to struggling with getting through one paragraph of an article without having to rely on a dictionary. I started to question my ability as a student and wondered if I was smart enough. I had little connection with any other graduate students and was very much missing my colleagues and Aboriginal connections from home (district # 1). Fortunately, my present school district kept me employed as a workshop presenter to teachers, so I could still interact and work with other educators who were interested in making a positive change for Aboriginal students. That year was transformative for me in that I started to see myself as someone who could truly begin to make a difference in the education system. I started to dream that I could do more for my people and was hopeful that this new district would truly be open to systemic change for the betterment of Aboriginal kids.

At university, I should not have been surprised when I was called upon during one of my courses because of my Aboriginal ancestry. The professor learned I was Aboriginal, and seemed quite interested. As far as I knew, I was one of only two Aboriginal doctoral students in the Department of Curriculum & Instruction at that time and again; I was the “rarity” in the institution of learning – particularly at the Ph.D. level. During one class I found myself becoming nervous as the professor stated that because we had so many students with different ethnic backgrounds, we would go around the table, introduce ourselves, and say “hello” in our native language. As my turn was getting closer, I thought I could just make something up – nobody would know if I said some gibberish and pretended it to be Mohawk, right? All kidding aside, I knew I

could not lie and instead stated my name and then said “Hello.” The look on the professor’s face was priceless. I don’t think he was expecting me to respond in English. At that instant, I felt that I needed to stand up and share *why* it might be that I did not know my language. I chose not to but I wondered how he could assume as much. I have come to understand that many Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people have assumptions based on what they *think* should be correct. This professor assumed that I knew my Mohawk language or perhaps had a Mohawk name. Many educators have suppositions of what Aboriginal students know about their culture as well.

During the spring of 2006, as I was juggling five courses and a part-time position in my district, I applied for a principalship. I was successful in my application and felt fortunate to be hired. My self-esteem was high and I felt that my skills would truly be appreciated in this new role. For the district to hire me as a principal after being a vice-principal for only a year proved to me that they saw my potential. I felt that they saw my passion and I was eager to take on this new challenge. I was committed to doing well on the remainder of my courses and return to work full-time. I continued to read, read, and read more so that I could prepare for my writing journey. Little did I know how my third administrative assignment would change my life, perspective on leadership and my changing sense of self.

2006 – 2007: Eastwood Elementary

After completing my year of coursework towards my doctorate degree, I began my second year as an administrator. I returned as a vice-principal to a lovely middle-class school, much like the one I had come from in my past district. I was placed there as a vice-principal for part of the school year and as acting principal for six months until

another school opened up for me. I thought it was a wonderful school to begin my principalship career at and the teachers and support staff were not only encouraging, but fun, friendly and relaxed. During this year I also received a lot of support from my director of instruction, as his interest was also in Aboriginal education, and he would often check in on me to see how I was doing in my new principalship role. The district also hired me as a .30 full-time equivalent (FTE) person for assisting in the Aboriginal education department. I loved this aspect of the position and knew that in a school with few problems, I could easily run a school and be a district leader in Aboriginal education.

At Eastwood, teachers appeared to have little stress as the students were capable, engaged, and studious. Students came to school prepared and on time, eager and well fed every morning. The parents were actively involved in the school, boasted a large active Parent Advisory Committee, and they were eager to help in the classroom and on field trips. Laughter could be heard from the staff room and down the hallways, and the staff would regularly plan social events and drinks at the local pub.

The school felt familiar and comfortable to me, like my past school in my old district. The students were well behaved and I only had two students in my office for discipline in a six month period. I was respected by the staff as a strong female principal and they appreciated the instructional leadership that I provided that year. Every day I thought I had died and gone to heaven – what an easy and pleasant assignment this was! My cultural identity was never questioned or analyzed and the staff and students were always interested and appreciative of any Aboriginal initiatives that I brought forward. It was sad to say goodbye to the staff at Eastwood Elementary School, and I thanked them

for allowing me to share some Aboriginal initiatives with them. That school had begun the year with only six students of Aboriginal descent out of 265 students, and by the time I left, five more had come forward to declare their ancestry. I knew that I had encouraged at least a few more Aboriginal students to be proud of their heritage and to use their voice to share it. Although I loved my experience at Eastwood, I was excited to be a principal in my *own* school. I left Eastwood being told that I did a commendable job in my first assignment, and again my self-esteem and optimism for the future was great. I was excited to hear what school I would be assigned in for the fall.

2007—2010: Edgewater Elementary

When I first heard I was coming to Edgewater Elementary School for my third assignment, I was nervous, apprehensive, and ashamed to say, disappointed. Edgewater had a poor reputation in the district – in fact I had even heard about this school while in my old district. When I was still a teacher in district # 1, a teacher friend who had worked in district # 2 found out about my administration quest. She told me that district # 2 had great elementary schools except there was a school you'd never want to go to – Edgewater. I secretly hoped that I would never get this school because it was known as a tough school with the lowest test scores in the district, students with severe behaviors and special needs, and it served the local Aboriginal communities that I had heard were difficult to deal with. I did not want to start off my new principalship career at the “worst school” in the district. I knew another person who was familiar with the school and she told me that the staff (which included many with Aboriginal descent) at Edgewater already had twenty questions about who I was and what I was like. I was already feeling some distrust and uneasiness. For my first full principalship, I was being

placed at an elementary school with the highest number of Aboriginal students in the district. The only other female Aboriginal principal left the district the previous year, so being the lone Indigenous principal, it did not seem like a coincidence that I was placed in this school. When my Aboriginal principal friend was told that I was Edgewater's principal, she was shocked and said that she thought the district would never pigeon hole me. A friend and I were talking about my new assignment over coffee.

“So let me get this straight. They go from having you work at the district level working with teachers on Aboriginal education to putting you in Edgewater? Isn't putting the only Aboriginal principal in a school with mostly Aboriginal students considered racist?” she asked.

I told her I hadn't thought of it in that way before. I thought it more along the lines that the district felt I could “relate” better to the school, community and large Aboriginal staff. They had seen me lead others to understand the merits and value of Aboriginal initiatives and knew of my passion. I had hoped that I was placed at Edgewater based on my merits, and not just my ancestral background. I admitted to her that it did seem coincidental, but that I would need to make the best of it. I told her that the advice I was given by a former superintendent was to “bloom where you are planted,” and I intended to do just that.

“That's like the district putting a principal who's in a wheelchair at a school for special needs students,” she continued on. I was amused and wondered if other administrators in the district thought the same thing. No matter the reason, I knew that Edgewater was going to be a challenging school and that I needed to be prepared for it. I was determined to not let my district down. Being the sole Aboriginal principal in the

district had its pressures. I felt the pressure from myself to not only do a good job, but an outstanding job. I felt that I still needed to prove myself in the new district and thought perhaps there were still some people who thought I was given preferential treatment, particularly when I landed the principalship posting after only one year of administrative experience.

I decided that I needed to know the reasons *why* I was placed at Edgewater School. I wanted to ascertain the facts so that I knew what might be in store for me. My mother's teachings were to listen well and learn from others' perspectives. I did not expect the district supervisor to come right out and admit that I was hired for Edgewater because I was Aboriginal – after all, how would that sound? Kind of racist, no? Nonetheless, I was interested in hearing his response.

“You were hired to be the bridge builder, Cammy. You are going to make a difference at Edgewater,” my director of instruction proudly announced to me. *Mmm. A bridge builder? Aren't bridges meant for walking over?* I appreciated the words of encouragement but wondered how I could change over 100 years of failing education for Aboriginal students in the short time at the school.

I spent most of the summer trying not to fret over my new position, and upped the research studies. I reread all of my workshop presentation handouts that I gave out when I had travelled around sharing my “message” to others. I wondered how I was going to make a difference in a school simply because I was Aboriginal. Or was that the key? Maybe because I *was* Aboriginal I could “*use it to my advantage and play the Indian card*” as my Mom would say. I chuckled at remembering her words and planned

that summer on how I might use my Mohawk upbringing to my advantage as a leader in my school.

Principals Come and Go – Mostly Go

I found it interesting in my first week of school to learn that in the past 15 years at Edgewater only brand new principals were hired to the school, with most of them being female. With a school with high needs, including impoverished vulnerable students, low parent involvement, low test scores and a significant number of special needs students, I wondered why the district wouldn't insist on well-seasoned, experienced principals to run the school. It made sense to me that a school with high needs requires an experienced, even veteran principal – not a neophyte. With many of the new principals staying only on average of three years, it appeared that many used the school as a stepping stone for “bigger and better things” and asked for a transfer at the first opportunity. I was disappointed to learn the short history of many of the principals at my new school and wondered how this might affect the students and staff morale. Looking around the district I also noted that the “choice” schools across the tracks had long standing principals who had been there many years, some for over a decade. I was starting to see a clearer picture. Maybe nobody wanted this school. Maybe the veteran principals declined any opportunity to go to Edgewater, or perhaps they were never asked to lead there in the first place.

Later in the year I approached my new director of instruction about this dilemma as I felt there were some systemic changes that could be made in a school such as mine. I told her that I had noticed that many principals come and go at my school and suggested that it could be from the heavy work load and busy chaotic days. I stated that

it is difficult to run such a challenging school when I was not a full-time principal. I started to share the day to day adventures in my school when she cut me short. She admitted that it was a tough school, but because of that, principals were only *expected* to be there for a few years. I added that it is important to have a principal who is committed to the school for a significant length of time so that change can occur and be sustained, and it is best for the school to have continuity. My suggestion was met with a chuckle and a statement along the lines of how she wouldn't allow me to stay at the school any longer than a few years as she didn't want me to get "burned out." It seemed that status quo would remain, even in a unique school such as mine. What I was asking for was support so that I could do the best job I could, but I was being shut down. I was quickly realizing that I wasn't going to change the world any time soon. I was feeling disappointed that my words were so easily dismissed and felt that I might be alone in understanding the uniqueness of my school, at least at the district level.

At Edgewater, the principal is not considered full-time due to the student population being under a certain cut-off point. In my role I was a .90 FTE administrator and carried a .10 FTE teaching load. There are no exceptions to this rule that has been in place long before I came on board. Even though I had more staff to supervise than schools twice my school's population, and a much larger complex budget, the process remained. In order for me to be a full-time principal I would either have to buy time out of the school budget or teach the difference in time. With me being run off my feet most of the day, I couldn't imagine having to commit to teach in a classroom. I opted to buy the difference of .10 FTE with my special needs budget. I was dealing with problem behaviors most of the day anyway, so it made sense. In addition, there was no

administration time available for my vice-principal to assist me as he also had full-time teaching duties. I became inventive and was able to give him over two hours a week for some of his many duties. I was trying to suggest to my supervisor that if I was full-time and my vice-principal was given some administration time that perhaps principals would want to stay because they would be receiving support from the district level. Being at a school with such unique needs requires thinking creatively so that time can be given to students and staff who need to see their principal often, and support given at a moment's notice. Some of our students were, much like I was as a child, living in chaos, and faced crisis on a regular basis. They required staff that was cognizant and caring of their needs and who could provide the time and support that children needed when something would trigger them to lose control and cause an outburst.

Schools in my district were also given services such as speech and language, occupational therapy and counseling based on the number of students in the school and not the level of need. Although our school had the highest case load of students requiring speech and language services, we received the lowest amount of service because of our small school population. Is this fair for our Aboriginal students who sometimes require more service so they can be successful in school? We have more students requiring speech and language services than a school three times our size. Being in a complex inner city school with 100% of our students considered 'vulnerable' does not mean that we will get more counseling services either. It would make sense that this would be a service that could be given to help our students who require one-on-one or group programs. As a principal, I also make the least amount of money than principals who run larger schools with less staff. I have more staff to supervise than

some schools twice my size, but because of status quo, schools like mine are not treated any differently than schools “across the tracks” that have nowhere near the needs that we have. Every year I have brought these inequities to the forefront, but my voice is not heard. One year we received an extra day for speech and language services, but this was cut back the following year.

Some of my student’s lives were in chaos and most days felt the same for me. A typical day for me was assisting with students’ behavioral issues, retrieving students who had bolted from the classrooms, listening to angry parents who were upset with how their child was treated by a staff member or other students, communicating with outside agencies, consoling upset staff, juggling many daily staff and student absences and directly supervising 33 staff members. The climate at Edgewater was such that something dreadful was about to happen: the fire alarm pulled, students fighting, a phone call from a supervisor with a complaint from a parent – the list was long on some days. On top of that, present experiences triggered past painful memories from my childhood. Childhood memories of the effects of poverty, and my chaotic home life were being played out with my families in my school. I found that I was taking my work “home” with me and not coping very well my first year. Except now I was the principal and was in charge of ensuring the learning and safety of my students.

Staff Dynamics

I found it an emotional challenge coming into Edgewater School. I had just spent a year of building close relationships and personal friendships with many staff from Eastwood, and I was feeling disconnected to my new staff. The year started with some hostility, distrust and power struggles. Unfortunately, there was also no transition

meeting between me and the past principal, so I was taken aback when I walked into the school noticing a toxic environment among some staff members. I could see that I could not expect the same school culture here as the school “across the tracks” in which I came from. I was also a much different leader than the departing principal who was there for just over two years. Whereas the past principal had a lenient, relaxed almost laissez-faire approach, mine was probably considered more authoritarian in comparison, even though I am not. I knew that the first few months of an administrative change were crucial in beginning to transform and shape my new school, and I quickly had to try and build relationships with my staff. One thing I knew for sure was that disengaged and despondent staff is not conducive for students’ learning.

Becoming entrenched in my school that first year solidified my belief that the Aboriginal students I served deserved the best education possible. They were entitled to the best principal, teaching staff, and resources. I was prepared to make structural changes in the school that best suited them as learners. I had high expectations for myself and my staff, and this initially caused some difficulties in my new school. Some staff had become complacent and quite comfortable in maintaining status quo in their classrooms and were not willing to make changes to their teaching, programs, or attitudes. In some classrooms it was difficult to ascertain what learning was actually occurring. When I questioned the students, they didn’t even know what their tasks were or what it was they were supposed to be learning. I could see how difficult the students’ behaviors were and wondered how many of those behaviors were due to either boredom or work not designed for their skill and developmental level. I observed that some teachers were inadvertently blaming poverty and home issues and using them as excuses

to lower their expectations for learning, or worse, blaming the parents or students. One teacher told me late in October that he was already burned out. We had barely begun the school year, and he was ready for his winter break. I aimed to meet the teachers where they were, and progress from there. Teachers that were negative always seemed to have their say, so I worked with the less outspoken teachers who were open to new ideas, and they, in turn, would share their successes with others. The staff culture was certainly not that of my last school and I started to understand the reasons. Some teachers were stressed, tired, cranky, and some were negative and apathetic. After being in the school a short time, I noticed that many were feeling desperate and were ready for some changes.

I worked closely with staff that were having difficulty being positive role models for the students or did not understand the reason for its importance. We discussed body language and staff was asked to be cognizant of how their behavior and words affected vulnerable students. If expectations are low from the principal to the teacher, then a culture can be formed that can negatively affect students and their learning. Being the authentic leader that I was, I shared that I did have high expectations and expected a lot from myself and ultimately others. I asked that staff show respect to each other and to model how we want our students to behave. My mother had taught me to not put myself above others and to be respectful to all. I found that being in a position of leadership and needing to uphold the rules of the institution initially posed challenges for me. Many new female principals grapple with role conflicts when shifting from teaching to administrative positions (Sanchez & Thornton, 2010), and I was no exception. On one hand the staff wanted to consider me an equal and on the other hand I needed to follow the rules and be directive. Initially this made it difficult in my new school environment

where some staff were clearly not acting professional or being positive role models for the students.

Within a short time of being at my school, I had three staff members approach and inform me that a particular Aboriginal staff member often wore hats and inappropriate t-shirts to school in the past and this was ignored by past administration. I had not seen this yet and so I let them know that as role models for students, we all need to set good examples. Within a short time of these conversations, the staff member in question began to wear a hat during the school day. When I approached the staff member, an excuse was made that her head was cold. I had to insist that the staff member refrain from wearing her ball cap so that the students could see that the staff followed the school rules as well. She defied my directive and continued to wear her hat. She demanded to know where this was written in school or district policy and said that she would comply if she saw it in a written policy. I explained that there are unwritten rules but if we expect this from our students, we need to expect even better from the adults that work with them. I was quite surprised by her defiance and so asked for advice from a local Aboriginal Elder who became my confidant while at Edgewater. The result of that meeting reaffirmed that I needed to take a stand. Unfortunately that staff member defied my directives on three occasions and I had to write a letter of direction which was supported by her local union and human resources. It certainly was not something I wanted to do and it made me uncomfortable to go that route. I could not understand why I was being challenged in this way and knew that there must be a lesson to be learned. After the letter was received this staff member started to change her attitude, as did I.

I purposely made a point of getting to know this staff member on a more personal level and came to value her contributions to the school and the community. I was thankful for her offerings to the school and what the students could learn from her cultural teachings. By the end of the second year I gained more respect for this valued staff member, and I believe the respect is mutual. When the incidents first occurred, I felt the pressure to stop the behavior as I had three other staff members who were uncomfortable with this staff member's defiance of the rules that are in place for students. They too wanted to feel that they were equal and felt that all adults should be setting the bar high for behaviors and expectations, and I could not agree more. I appreciate and value the suggestions and feedback from the local Elder and learned a lot from that specific experience. I wonder if this person had taken issue with me because I am a female leader and she was required to take my direction. Some people view female leaders as having a lack of assertiveness or consider them weak (Chisholm, 2001). After these incidents, I believe this person had a new understanding of who I was as an Indigenous leader who was confident, self-directed, strong, and fair (Jacobs & Witt, 2006). Working with community and building relationships is sometimes difficult as a new leader, but particularly in a school with a large Aboriginal community, is crucial to student's success (Ball, 2004; Crippen, 2005). Some of my new initiatives at Edgewater were not welcomed or accepted easily, even though I asked for feedback and consensus on what I could.

In traditional Aboriginal leadership, a leader would aim for consensus on matters of importance (Jacobs & Witt, 2006). I quickly learned that with over 30 teachers and support staff, it was challenging to have decisions made quickly and by consensus. I

often had to skip the discussions, votes and dialogue. Not conferring with staff was difficult for me as a leader, as without the “buy in” from staff; new programs or resources are often discounted as being a “top down” initiative and not taken seriously. Being a servant leader is difficult when half of your staff cannot be involved in decision making due to time constraints or union schedules. After the end of the first year, a couple of staff members who had differing viewpoints than mine chose to move on to other schools. If a staff member wanted and needed a change, I would encourage this, even though staff changes are done at the district and not at the school level. Staff knew my core values and was aware that students were of utmost importance to me, so it was clear where my priorities were. I found that when you made a decision and shared how it ultimately benefitted the student, it was difficult to argue the point.

Social Services in Action

While I may have rejected my Mom’s encouragement and suggestions to go into social work, in my role as a principal at Edgewater, I felt like a social worker at many times. Due to the prevalent social issues that plague many families on reserves and those living in poverty, social worker presence was the norm at my school. The phone calls from social workers would sometimes start on the first day of school. Parts of that phone call involved checking to see if the child (ren) were present that day, and then arranging a private meeting space for the social worker to interview the child, and sometimes the siblings. Because I was mandated to allow these visits at my school, I was not able to inform the parents, and this never felt right. In fact, I would feel like I was the villain by retrieving the child from the classroom. Trying to say soothing things like “*this nice lady would just like to talk with you for a few minutes*” never sat well with me. I knew

that depending on what was said, this “nice lady” could then remove the child from my school. It made me feel like I was a part of a script that I never wanted to act in. Some students would cry when the familiar workers would walk in the school’s door. One little girl ran up to a social worker, grabbed her leg, and begged her to let her see her baby cousin. It brought tears to both my eyes and the social worker who was almost speechless. Social workers were in our school so much that I half-heartedly joked I should look at providing them with their own office space. I saw the negative part of the role they played in families’ lives, and from my perspective I was glad that I didn’t pursue a degree in this field years ago. I can see that their jobs are not easy and they have huge caseloads. I know that social workers are there to help children and families, but their presence in my school was still not welcomed from an educational point of view. As a social worker, I would have wanted to take every child home and give them things that living in poverty and chaos wouldn’t allow: milk and cookies after school, a family dinner where the day was shared, a routine of bath, story and bedtime at a regular hour. I did not judge the parents at my school— most were doing the very best that they could to provide for their families. Some were caught up in the demands of life and could not provide the kind of upbringing that the dominant society deemed appropriate. I did not feel that school was the appropriate place to permit social workers access to children. It was discouraging to see the seemingly regular involvement of social services in my school, and my staff and I would have many discussions on when and if they really needed to contact social services.

One of the questions I wondered was how a teacher with a Eurocentric viewpoint was qualified to determine if an Aboriginal child was being neglected? Just because a

child is sent to school with dirty clothes and worn out runners does not mean he is necessarily being neglected. I was considered a “latch key” child and didn’t have the best clothing or homemade lunches, but I did not consider myself neglected. It depends on whose perspective it comes from. Does having dirty clothes, lice and no snack mean there is negligence? Is a child wearing flip-flops in April reason enough to inform a social worker? I would argue that for some families, Aboriginal or not, a clean home and clothing just isn’t a priority. Neglect is in the eye of the beholder and that is likely why many children were put in non-Aboriginal foster homes during the 60s Scoop (or Swoop) – because members of the dominant society felt that Aboriginal home lives were not up to the same standards as theirs and so this warranted an excuse for removing children. “Ethnocentric ideas about correct family structures and norms meant that Aboriginal familial and community practices were not accepted” as legitimate (McGrath & Stevenson, 1996, p. 48).

It is mandated in the School Act and ultimately my school that all teaching staff inform social services if they suspect that a child is being abused or neglected. As the principal, I need to uphold the rules of the system and insist that teachers call in their concerns to the authorities. Even though I know that some Aboriginal families have more permissive ways of parenting, I need to conform to the expectations of my organization. I chose to deal with this further by having informed dialogue with my staff about some of these differences, and encourage our school family counselor to work with the families, instead of the system working against them. Having staff become apprised of the differences in parenting helped some to understand the different viewpoint that many Aboriginal parents have towards childrearing. When I shared with

my staff about my mother's parenting style while I was growing up, some let out a gasp. I told them that the natural consequence of my behavior was a pregnancy and baby at 14. I smiled as I told them you can't argue a more logical consequence to having underage sex without protection then to get charges laid against you and become a teenage mother.

In the first half of my year, two of our students were apprehended by social services right from the school. The parents or caregivers had no idea until they came after school to pick up their child. Consoling a scared and upset parent in your office is difficult, as I empathize with them and yet I know that I also have legal, moral and institutional obligations. I think back to when my Mom was working with Ma Mawi and wonder why, after over 20 years, we are still seeing mostly non-Aboriginal social workers coming into our schools and taking Aboriginal children from their homes. In my entire career, I had never experienced such a saddening situation as I was witnessing at my school. Being removed from your parents' home is the last thing most children ever want as they love their parents unconditionally. Many parents who abuse have been abused themselves and that is all they know. If they are unaware or not shown a different way, then the cycle of abuse continues. Seeing the fear and hearing the cries of students in my school as they are led out with a strange social worker broke my heart and I would become frustrated that this was a part of my school climate. Whatever happened to teaching children and being an instructional leader? Whatever happened to making school and safe and happy place for students? Many days revolved around finding quiet spaces for social workers to interview students, consoling the children and

sometimes teachers afterwards, and then experiencing how quickly an Aboriginal parent can lose trust in the school system and those who represent it.

Apprehensions were and still are occurring at schools, so it is no wonder that some Aboriginal families are hesitant about sending their children to school particularly if the families are in the midst of turmoil. It certainly makes it difficult spending time building relationships with parents, only to have social services come in, interview a child, and then the parents learn about it, get angry, storm my office and scream out accusations or blame. That relationship that has taken months or years to build is gone in an instant. Instead of the 60s Scoop of taking Aboriginal children from the home, it has become the “School Scoop” and it is tragic in our day and age.

“How dare you let that social worker come in and take my child out of this school? You are supposed to protect the children here! You are Aboriginal, you should have been able to stop this or at least phoned me so I could be here,” one parent screamed at me in my office after school. All I could do was listen and try to gently explain that I have no choice but to follow the Ministry’s policies and would have called her if I could. Parents have the right to demand that their children be kept safe at school, and with the history of residential schools, they know how important it is for their child’s wellbeing (Nelson & Allison, 2000). I wished I could do more for the Aboriginal community in this regard, and so have had several conversations with team leaders and the social workers that work in the Aboriginal department of social services to see if we can find other alternatives to the School Scoop.

This is an example of structural change needing to occur. There needs to be a place, other than the school, where social workers can interview, apprehend and monitor

children. We even have one social worker who parks his car across the street from our school in the morning and watches students and their families as they come to school. Do you think our Aboriginal parents know he is sitting in his vehicle spying on them? Although this social worker thinks he is pretty smart in his “covert” operation, I am fairly certain the parents are fully aware of his presence. I think it is atrocious that families are being monitored in this way as they come to school. Social workers have told me that school is considered a “safe” and “neutral” place for students. However, the school becomes a source of fear for both the child and parent if it is used as a place that interrupts their learning and makes them scared to be in school or too nervous to come to school. One parent kept her children home for two weeks following a social worker visit to the school, stating that her children were terrified that if they came to school they would be taken away by the White people. Ministry visits are affecting the learning of our students, because if they are fearful of social workers coming to the school, they shut down and cannot learn. How difficult it must be for a child to go back into the classroom after being talked to by a stranger about her home life and how she is treated by her parents. Teachers, too, have had to “pick up the pieces” after a child returns to the classroom only to act out negatively or cry inconsolably. It keeps Aboriginal parents on the outside (literally and figuratively) and not willing to trust the teachers or administration. It makes it difficult to build solid relationships within the community, because what might occur within one Aboriginal family affects the whole community, and that includes the school. In any Aboriginal community it does not take long for stories, gossip and rumors to spread. A once friendly and caring principal now becomes the White Bitch who doesn’t belong and is now considered the Other.

Changing School Times

As a staff we discussed the possibility of changing our school start time to reflect the number of lates we had. Looking at the data early on in the school year from past years and then observing it throughout the first part of the school year, I could see that tardiness was an issue, as was attendance. Many of our students were involved in cultural activities in the evenings and would show up ten or fifteen minutes past the entry bell. I surmised that if we started fifteen minutes later (a 9:00 AM start time) that perhaps the students might be on time. Most of the staff was on board to implement this new strategy. We would be the elementary school with the latest start time in the district. It was quite a process of staff and community meetings, discussions, voting, and a presentation to the school board. It was also an opportunity to meet with other parents and begin to build important relationships. I recall a conversation I had with one support staff member about this issue that showed his Euro “slant” viewpoint.

“Why do *we* have to change for the Aboriginal families? Why don’t they just show up on time?” he said with disgust. I suggested that the present times aren’t working that well, it’s an easy change, and why not try it for a year to see what the data states? He then got into a discussion about how unfair it is that the school needs to change when other schools don’t have this issue. I understood that he was carrying a Eurocentric viewpoint of expecting Aboriginal students to conform to the dominant society’s expectations. He was adamant that it was *their* (Aboriginal students / parent) responsibility to integrate into the dominant society without question. I shared my Mohawk background and knowledge of residential schools to give the Aboriginal perspective; however he was not interested and was eager to leave the school at the end

of the year. I surmised that because of his “blindness” he might be best at another school, and I supported his desire to move to a more suitable school.

During this time period we had discussions about what we say to children when they arrive late. It brought me back to when my eldest daughter went to school late and was sent down to the principal’s office. I knew back then, just as I knew now, that if children are late in elementary school, it is usually not the children’s fault. It is the responsibility of the parents. Luckily, teachers and staff were generally comfortable to welcome students to school in a respectful manner, no matter what time they arrived. Did I *want* to have students coming in late to school? Absolutely not, but at least we could welcome them in a positive manner when they did arrive at school. Students were asked to check in at the office and could come and ask the secretary if their class was gone. Comments went from “Johnny, you are late again,” to “Hi Johnny, nice to see you. We are glad you are here.” Then the topic of *why* the child was late and how the school could assist was directed to the parents where it needed to be. This was not well accepted by some Aboriginal parents. I was blasted with responses like *Who do you think you are?* The benefit that I had over any other previous principal was that parents could not say that I was racist. As the school’s first Aboriginal principal, I had the Mohawk card as my ticket. I could share with my Aboriginal community that I was “one of them” and wanted to be a partner with them if their child broke the school rules or there was an issue. My two vice-principals weren’t quite so lucky and each of them has been called racist by parents. My male vice-principal was called a “fucking White man” after he disciplined an Aboriginal student. I wondered what the parent would have said had I had been the one disciplining. When my vice-principal left the school after two

years, we joked that his new Aboriginal name could be “Sitting Duck” because that is sometimes how he felt being an administrator at a school with some very outspoken parents who thought nothing of using inappropriate names to address non-Aboriginal people.

Identity Questions Arise

Not only did Edgewater have a large number of Aboriginal students, but also the largest Aboriginal staff in the district. This of course was a good thing, as our students, both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal, had the opportunity to see these staff members work closely with the students as positive role models. Many of our Aboriginal staff was willing and eager to share aspects of their culture with the students. Some Aboriginal staff did not know much of their cultural heritage, or chose not to share it, so I was careful to not be presumptuous just because of the phenotype.

To honor our Aboriginal population and provide cultural components in our school arts program, students were offered a cultural drumming program. I was exploring the time that students spent in this class and noted that the classes needed to be designed more effectively. Drumming was a meaningful and valued component of our arts program and I was working with Vicki, our Aboriginal support worker on a schedule for the program in mid-September. Vicki poked her head in my office one morning as I was feverishly working on the new massive, complicated school budget.

“Hey Cammy, I know you are Mohawk, so I was wondering if you knew any Mohawk songs?” she asked.

“What do you mean, Mohawk songs?” I clarified. *Can't she see that I am busy?*

At that moment I did not want to think about my Mohawkness – I was too busy trying to be an accountant and figure out how to do budgeting for the first time.

“You know – Mohawk drumming songs,” she remarked.

My face went hot; I started to look away and could feel my chest tightening.

“Umm, sorry, I don't,” I stammered. She took me off guard. *I don't like surprises.*

After she left, I immediately closed my door and felt angry. *She interrupted me while I am trying to figure out over a million dollar budget to ask if I knew Mohawk drumming songs. What is she getting at? Is she trying to fish for how “real” of an Indian I am? Great, here we go again.*” It was an immediate visceral reaction. I instantly went to that place of feeling defensive. I felt offended that I was being questioned at work about my cultural heritage and what I knew. After some time I started to reflect to turn the situation around. Here we have an Aboriginal woman from the local nation, asking if I had a Mohawk song so that she could use it to share, presumably, with the students. Once I changed my perspective, I actually felt honored at the request. I felt ashamed at my immediate reaction and wondered why I quickly went into defense mode. The experience made me realize that I needed to continue in my quest to learn what I can about my Mohawk culture, and maybe actually learn a Mohawk song. I also realized that I could have a stronger connection with my Aboriginal staff because I *was* Aboriginal and wasn't afraid to be transparent. I decided from then on that I would have a deeper conversation with others if issues of my background came up again, instead of keeping it inside. I was longing for the type of close relationships that I had developed with many of my Aboriginal friends from my

first school district, and knew that I needed to build trust and respect before I could get to that place.

At staff meetings, we blocked in regular sharing times to discuss topics about Aboriginal issues that related to our school. We talked and read about the impact of low expectations for children in poverty, the importance of parental involvement, and relevant Aboriginal curriculum for our students. Some of the topics were already familiar to our staff, but others were new and we strived to have open, honest dialogue. At the beginning of the school year we came up with guidelines for respecting differences while at work, and this included staff meeting conduct. All staff wanted to be heard and validated for their opinions and feelings. When teachers were asked to read an article on how some teachers have low expectations for students living in poverty, staff wanted to ensure that I wasn't wagging my finger at them. I was clear that I valued their work with the students and knew that they were coming from a place of caring. The teachers seemed more open to change when they were praised for their hard effort and the commendation for willing to "look outside of their box" to better assist our students.

It was satisfying when a teacher shared that she can always learn more, look at her own belief system, and change her outlook. I know that some teachers were looking for those students who were much like the ones at Eastwood School who came to school ready and capable of learning, with supportive parents. Our mostly non-Aboriginal teachers were likely hoping for students much like they were as learners – the White middle class "typical" student. Once teachers started to understand that they had a Eurocentric mindset, they could recognize the blinders and be more open to learn and change their styles of teaching to better reflect our students and community. I want to be

clear that not all staff members shared my perspective and there continues to be teachers who are not easily brought to a place of new learning or acceptance. Some of these teachers have been challenging to work with over the years and have expended a lot of my energy. I have come to understand that they are in a different place and on a different journey and I need to meet them where they are at. I do not allow their narrow perspectives to determine the path that the school needs to go as the students remain the sole reason for my perseverance. Who else will advocate for these students? The parents might if they knew how important their voices were. Some staff might also think that I will be gone soon, as history has taught them that the school goes through new administration every few years. Why try something new when the principal is going to leave soon anyways? Fortunately to keep spiritual wellness, I have learned to leave the “muck” at work most days and not take other peoples (staff, parents and students) issues home with me. I literally close the door at work and say a good bye to the day’s issues and problems and focus on the good things that happened in my school that day. It is not that I do not care, because I deeply do, it is just that in order to keep the balance of the medicine wheel intact, I need to keep my work and home life separate.

Stereotypes Prevail

In my first few months at Edgewater we culled the library for books that were either outdated or depicted Aboriginal people in negative or stereotypical ways. There were many outdated and inappropriate books that students had access to on a daily basis. It is no wonder that stereotypes continue to fester when a school library still has books that depict little “Indian” children wearing headdresses, carrying tomahawks and living in tipis. This appeared to be the same literature I was reading when I was in elementary

school. I was surprised to discover that the school with the highest number of Aboriginal elementary students likely had the lowest and most outdated collection of Aboriginal literature. I was new at the school and shared the state of our library at a public meeting with my superintendent of schools and Aboriginal community in attendance. On further reflection, I realized that perhaps this wasn't the politically correct way to share out that we had an outdated library. However, the district listened and discreetly provided our school with extra library funds over and above our school operating budget.

This was an example of a district providing extra resources to where the needs are, for both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students. The district went against status quo and gave funds to my school because it realized that our Aboriginal students deserve a more equitable piece of the pie (Coombs, 1994; Young, 2001). It cannot be argued that providing quality literature with Aboriginal content benefits all students. Districts could go one step further and provide funding and resources for all schools to cull their libraries for outdated books and enhance their libraries with more appropriate fiction and non-fiction Aboriginal books. The funding of \$1000.00 that was provided was a single offering, but it was appreciated nonetheless.

Specialty Hiring

If there is a teaching position open at a school, principals in my district must consider hiring Aboriginal candidates first. A non-Aboriginal teacher could have 20 years of teaching experience and be passionate about Aboriginal education, but if an Aboriginal teacher fresh out of university applies he or she is given first option for the position. I understand the equity hiring program and do think it is important to hire the Aboriginal person but only *if all other factors are equal*. Just like I had told that teacher

in my first administrative assignment, I do not think that educators should get preferential treatment simply because they have an Aboriginal background. For every brown-skinned Aboriginal teacher who knows nothing about her culture, I can name a non-Aboriginal teacher who is more experienced in teaching and more open and willing to meet the needs of her Aboriginal students. Good teaching is paramount for the success of Aboriginal students – indeed, *all* students. It is important for Aboriginal students to have role models; however, if they are to succeed in the school system, they require top quality, knowledgeable, skilled and open-minded teachers who will try new and innovative strategies. These are the teachers that look within themselves and wonder how they can change their teaching practice to meet the needs of the students versus blaming the child for “not getting it.” Good teachers come in all different packages and it is only through a transparent hiring system and autonomy at the school level that can we ensure we are getting top quality teachers for our most vulnerable learners.

When Aboriginal educators are hired, whether they are teachers or assistants, there needs to be more than one person who makes the hiring decision. The Aboriginal candidate should not be passed along to the Aboriginal administrator to determine if they are qualified or should be hired. Districts should consider having members of the Aboriginal community, Enhancement Agreement, or Aboriginal Council be a part of the selection process. We want to have the best Aboriginal people working with our students, but we need to ensure that the process is clear, transparent, and the person has the right qualifications in order to do the job.

Racism in my School

In my third year of principalship I noticed a problem brewing in our grade four class. A new boy from Africa had just joined our school population. Jeremy was a sweet, big boy, who had designated special needs in learning. Jeremy had difficulty understanding boundaries, both physically and socially. He liked to get close to you when he spoke and he would often interrupt other children's play so he could get their attention. His classroom was comprised of 94% of Aboriginal students, and with his darker skin, he stood out from his peers. His teacher approached me one day and told me that she was concerned because when she awarded Jeremy with a certificate for doing good work, some of the students booed him. She informed me that she told her students their behavior was not acceptable and they needed to clap and say something positive to students who are receiving an award.

Unfortunately, some of this teacher's students began to tease Jeremy to the point of bullying. Classmates were enlisting other students in different classes to call him horrible names like *Brown Boy*, or *Brown Dog*. It was at this time that I needed to step in. I talked with the teacher about using some lesson plans on anti-bullying so she could better educate her class. I spoke to the class about their unacceptable behavior and we came up with ideas on how we could make Jeremy feel more at home at his new school. I was rallying our students to do better, to make a new student feel welcome, and have them show empathy to a student who was feeling sad. At recess times, I made a point of observing Jeremy and engaged in some play time with him as well. At the teacher's request, she and I met with both sets of parents to share our concern and develop a plan of action. I found it particularly interesting that an oppressed group of people (in this

case Aboriginal students) found it acceptable to use their power over another minority (much like how they have been treated). The fact that these were eight and nine year olds were sad and surprising and I felt for Jeremy and what he was enduring.

Unfortunately, one of the grade four instigators would not let up, and this led to a school suspension. I knew that we needed to continue working hard to build our students' self-esteem and pride of their heritage. Eventually this student made some good friends while outside playing soccer. At staff meetings we talked as an entire staff to look at how we can all help our students by educating them on what bullying looks like and to learn how to deal with it if it happens. The name calling that Jeremy was experiencing triggered my childhood memories of being bullied at school, and I took the events very seriously. My hope is that the racist words he heard from some of our Aboriginal students fade away quickly and do not follow him through his young life.

2010: Reflections on my Third Year

My leadership style has transformed since I first began my principalship at Edgewater. I have also come to know myself as a Mohawk woman in a holistic way and this itself has been shapeshifting. The Indigenous view is about being a co-creator, "transforming ourselves and re-creating ourselves as we need to meet our challenges" (McGregor, 2004, p. 403). I came into the school feeling nervous and apprehensive and finished off my third year feeling hopeful and excited for the fourth year to start. I have been told by fellow teaching staff that I seem to be more relaxed and open, and they trust me now that they have had the opportunity to get to know me and learn my core values. These are important facets that need to be in place in order for others to follow their leader and move forward (Fullan, 2002; Gardner et.al, 2005; Goleman, 2002).

I am now a strong advocate not only for our Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students, but also for my staff who genuinely try their best and work hard every day. As an authentic and reflective leader, I can only be myself and reflect and learn from my mistakes. I have been the first to admit when I have erred, and I believe this has improved many relationships in the school. I have learned to detach myself from parent, student and staff stresses and problems, so that I can go home and be the best mother, wife and friend that I can. I have learned how important it is to build and maintain healthy relationships with both my staff and parents, and this will be one of my top priorities in the upcoming school year.

Parent Relationships

It has been an interesting journey with my school parents the past three years. Some of our parents thought that an Aboriginal principal could bring in changes quickly, i.e. implementing new curriculum and changing teaching methodologies, but they have seen that things take time and money. I have learned how important it is to change the things you can, like building on relationships within my community and including them in decision-making. When I began my principalship at Edgewater I did not question the validity of student suspensions. I suspended nine students in my first year, and didn't think too much about it. I never thought to ask the parents if they felt a suspension was not appropriate, nor did I make much effort to encourage them to be a part of developing our school's code of conduct. I made a lot of mistakes in my first year at Edgewater. I now opt for alternative methods that fully involve the parents or caregivers of my students. Aboriginal parents resist becoming involved in the school because administrators do not ask them for advice or guidance about their children (Friedel,

1999; Nelson & Allison, 2000). I have learned that many a problem will get solved simply by calling the parent and having the *child* explain the situation from their point of view. By the time I get on the phone, the parent already has a solution to the problem or a suggestion for a consequence. I have had parents ask me to suspend their child and others tell me that it would not work for them. I sit down with my parents and ask them, as their child's first teacher, what we should do together for the benefit of their child. Once parents understood that I wanted to work alongside them and not against them, the trust began to build.

I know that I have adopted many of the dominant society's viewpoints and it takes work to break through and deconstruct how colonization affects me as a leader in my school. When I acknowledge the parents as being the caretakers of their children, the choices become easier. I can understand the parents who do not want to come into my school, but I encourage them nonetheless. I will not give up. I remind them, when needed, that this is not a residential school, and thank God, times have changed for their children. Some Aboriginal parents are not accustomed to being asked what *they* think about the school and its programs. They are not used to being invited into the school for positive messages about their children or to ask how they think we could make the school a better place to be (Friedel, 1999). Certainly I believe that further changes need to happen in our school system, and I encourage teachers to gain input from their *students* on what they *want* to learn so that they are more engaged.

Granted, some Aboriginal parents in our school consider me to be just another White principal and do not care to know me because I represent the "institution" and all that it stands for. An Aboriginal principal can become one of the *Others* in the eyes of

some Aboriginal parents. Any principal at Edgewater needs to make a huge effort to approach parents with a smile and allow them to see who you are and what you stand for. Many Aboriginal parents or caregivers would not approach the principal because of fear, disdain, or painful memories. This is perhaps due to residential school intergenerational effects, and because of this history I need to be empathic and understanding.

As a female Aboriginal leader I also understand how the female roles have changed within Aboriginal society, and the respect that many women have lost may be due to colonial influences. Perhaps due to the number of single-parent families we have, or that the mothers in my school community feel more comfortable with me, I tend to have more interactions with my students' mothers. I bring not only the feminine but the Indigenous way of knowing into my leadership role. Traditionally, the 'real authority' belonged to the matriarchs of the family, and this could also be why I have more interactions with the mothers when there is a conflict at school (Jacobs & Witt, 2006). I value the women in my community and their contributions they make towards helping me learn what works best for them, their children and the smooth running of the school. I have learned to be a good listener and allow the women that visit my office to talk, cry, or yell without judgment. In a recent interaction with a mom on the phone, she told me that she was too angry to come in and talk with her child's teacher, and she was afraid she would "lose it" if she did. I told her that her anger was welcome in my office and that I would rather her come in and be angry than to stay away and be angry and deal with her feelings alone. By the end of our dialogue she had calmed down and didn't find any further need to vent – or to "lose it" on the teacher. This is a far cry from when I

first started at Edgewater where some of the parents would go straight to the Chief or members of the band council if they had a concern about a teacher.

I make sure that I head outside on a regular basis and mingle with parents who are not comfortable coming in the school. Having strong, positive connections with students also helps parents to see that I am not the “bad guy.” For new parents that come to the school, I let them know through conversations or newsletters that I am Mohawk and a visitor to their territory. I believe that this shows them that although I am a Mohawk person, I still am apprised and respectful of the uniqueness we have as individual nations. More and more though, the similarities are becoming increasingly apparent. I am more confident with parents to share who I am as a leader, and the more I learn from my staff and students, the more I can reach self-efficacy as a leader.

Curricular and School Culture Changes

We know that education has failed Aboriginal students in the past, and current graduation statistics have not warranted much better results. Teachers have been presented with new mandated curriculum that has prescribed Aboriginal learning outcomes, have attended workshops, professional development, “cultural” tours, and even courses through university teaching programs. Still, Aboriginal students are not performing well in schools and school districts are acutely aware of this travesty. Teachers generally know *how* to teach, it is the *why* they are asked to teach Aboriginal outcomes where we sometimes get stuck. Teachers holding Eurocentric viewpoints may not understand the need for change or the importance of the consequences that many Aboriginal students face if they do not finish high school. Social failure at the high school level can lead to many unproductive outcomes: dropping out of school, teenage

pregnancy, crime, and drug usage – all which have serious implications for quality of life as an adult (Cooper, 2003). Tragically, in many Aboriginal communities there are high suicide rate statistics, with some communities having 800 times the national average (<http://suicideinfo.ca/csp/assets/alert52.pdf>). There needs to be wide-spread systemic change in order for Aboriginal students to succeed in school and improve the dismal graduation rate statistics.

Many non-Aboriginal teachers who are raised with a middle-class background come into teaching with what I refer to as a “Euro-slant”. This Euro-slant refers to the mental models we all possess that are the “deeply held internal images of how the world works, images that limit [individuals] to familiar ways of thinking and acting” (Senge, 1990, p. 174). These assumptions can lead to generalizations that cloud teacher’s understandings of one’s perceptions and actuality. Teachers rely on what is familiar, what has been taught and practiced (hence, doing the calendar first thing every morning). When teachers understand that their mental models are assumptions and not facts, then they can be more willing to accept and understand when challenges are made to their assumptions. In my school the way I have chosen to address the Euro-slant is through much dialogue between staff members, and particularly through Aboriginal staff conversing with non-Aboriginal staff. We have also been involved in action research at our school where we looked at the reading scores and attitudes of students. Teachers assumptions were that students performed better academically in the morning. Our results showed that students actually enjoyed reading more when they had their guided reading groups in the afternoon, and the reading progress for students increased when they had their reading instruction after lunch. Teachers were surprised at the results, but

learned from this that deep learning can occur even if the students appear lethargic. The school culture needed to change from that of teachers working on assumptions and in isolation in their classrooms to that of being willing to listen, ask questions, and expand their knowledge base.

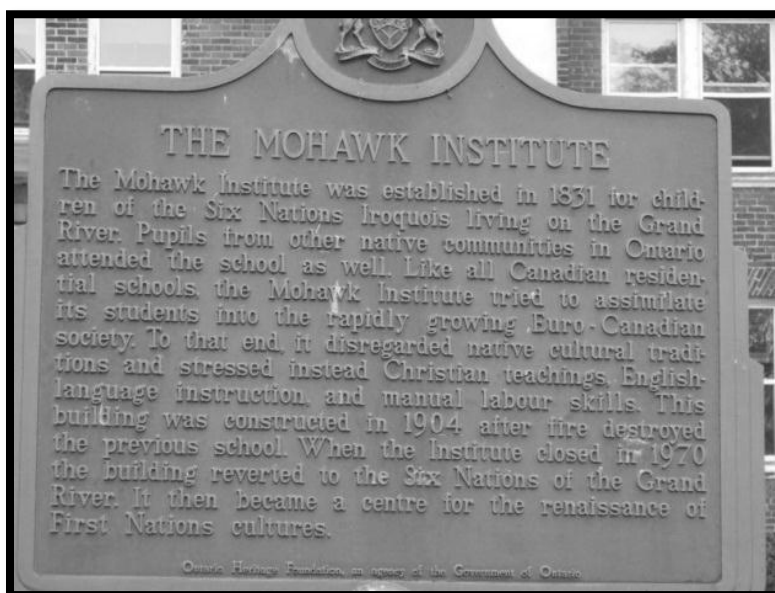
At Edgewater, I was somewhat surprised to learn that one of the Aboriginal teachers was going into classrooms and teaching the Aboriginal components of the provincial curriculum. That is adequate, but it could be better, because the non-Aboriginal teacher would leave for a break and not be a part of the lesson. It seemed to me that the Aboriginal “specialist” was being used to teach what was considered a “specialty” subject. Perhaps it was another example of the few Aboriginal educators being asked to teach all that is Aboriginal, because of their ancestry. I asked the regular classroom teacher to stay in the room to learn from the Aboriginal teacher who had much cultural knowledge. It was also an opportunity for the non-Aboriginal teacher to see the rich Aboriginal literature that was brought into the classroom so that the students could see themselves reflected in the curriculum. In the lessons, the prescribed Aboriginal learning outcomes were taken directly from the curriculum and technically, any teacher of any background could and should be teaching them. The difference between how the Aboriginal teacher was teaching compared to her non-Aboriginal colleague was that she was coming from an Indigenous epistemology. The children were learning through experimenting, group work, and coming to form new learnings through discovery. This Indigenizing of the curriculum is beneficial for all students and makes the learning more culturally relevant for our Aboriginal learners.

Non-Aboriginal teachers need to step out of their comfort zone, take off their blinders, if you will, and be aware of their Euro-slant perspective. The Leadership in First Nations initiative by the British Columbia School Superintendents Association estimated that Aboriginal teachers comprised less than 1% of teachers who are registered with BCTF (<http://www.bcssa.org/topics/firstnations/firstnations.html>). This statistic demonstrates that it is imperative that the teachings continue through our mostly non-Aboriginal teachers. Teaching Aboriginal learning outcomes are of benefit to both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal learners alike. Teaching Aboriginal learning outcomes allows Aboriginal students to see themselves within the curriculum as smart, worthy and significant contributors to Canadian society. It can also show non-Aboriginal students the contributions that Aboriginal people have made since time immemorial. Today the international community has recognized the important role Aboriginal people and their knowledge can play in our global society (McGregor, 2004), and this needs to be shared out. Teaching Aboriginal learning outcomes can also begin to break down stereotypes and build stronger relationships. Our Aboriginal students need to be recognized for their uniqueness, but also for the similarities with other members of society. Just like teachers teach regular physical education classes or mathematics lessons, teachers should be ensuring that they teach the Aboriginal components of the curriculum. Every school district has district Aboriginal contacts, so if a teacher is struggling, they should be apprised by their principal on whom they can call.

Years ago I taught a grade six social studies unit on the Holocaust and I took it upon myself to be well read with the subject and visit the local Jewish museum to learn more. Why did I teach about the Holocaust? Because although I wasn't familiar with it

in detail, I knew it was a necessary part of our history and that I needed to learn more so I could teach it in a respectful and accurate manner. I did not feel that I needed to be Jewish to teach it. I was just an informed, interested teacher who thought it was part of my moral imperative to share the injustices of the past to all students (Coughlin, 2003). Should it not be the moral imperative for our non-Aboriginal teachers to be as respectful and thoughtful to teach about Aboriginal histories and cultures? If they left it up to the rare Aboriginal teacher to come into their classrooms to do it for them, then it would not happen at all and then every student will lose – particularly our Aboriginal students who will not see themselves represented in their school curriculum in a positive and respectful manner.

As First Nations people are the original inhabitants of Canada all teachers should be concerned with sharing the factual, relevant and interesting materials to students of



all backgrounds. In addition and perhaps more importantly, Aboriginal students have had an unequal starting base to formal

education over 100 years ago, and yet many similar tactics are being used to educate them today. Aboriginal students are expected to assimilate into the Euro-Canadian culture. Note the words on the Mush-hole's sign and I ask you to consider how much

things have really changed from 1831. Unequal treatment is necessary when there are relevant differences among students. As such if accommodations of personal characteristics between students are not addressed, then equal treatment in essence creates an inequality that must be addressed (Coombs, 1994). Monture-Angus asserts:

When the institution harms the Aboriginal students, I am responsible for that harm as I am a member of that institution. Yet within the structure of the institution, I have little if any immediate power to change the curriculum offerings beyond what I do in my own courses (1995, p. 65).

I am very limited to influence structural change at the district level, however, within my school, I will change what I can so that Aboriginal students succeed and curriculum is being delivered in a respectful and considerate manner. When we can, we ask local Aboriginal community members come to our school to assist us, and this will be a continued goal at Edgewater. Furthermore, funding could be provided at the district level for Aboriginal community members to develop local curriculum alongside teachers, or to provide programs where Elders can be a regular part of the school day. Archibald agrees that “many of our Elders and cultural people are not given due recognition (i.e., equality of pay) in educational institutions for their depth of cultural knowledge” (2008, p. 41). This would be educational dollars well spent and would be valuable for our Aboriginal learners. As we continue our dialogue at school, teachers are more understanding and appreciate *why* we are teaching Aboriginal outcomes, and this I believe, is half the battle.

Many of our Aboriginal students are, quite frankly, bored in school. Many teachers start their day off with the routine of reading the calendar or doing a chalkboard

activity. Some students would arrive late to *deliberately* miss out the first, often monotonous part of their day. When I overheard one student squeal “YES!” when he learned that he arrived just in time to miss the morning math routine, I started thinking what we could do to change how we operate at school. After sharing the late / tardy data to my teachers, I proposed that teachers make slight changes to their schedules.

I intentionally scheduled the “fun” physical education preparation classes (teacher’s prep times) to start at the beginning of the day, and encouraged teachers to have active learning centers, visual arts, music, drama, or computers first block. I thought this might entice the children to come to school on time. As we know that parents are responsible for ensuring that their children arrive and come to school every day, I thought we could have the children convince the parents that it was necessary that they get to school on time so they wouldn’t miss out on the fun. Although a couple of teachers implemented these changes, many were still adamant that morning calendar or language arts needed to occur promptly at the entry bell and after the attendance is taken. Teachers suggest that students are more eager and able to learn first thing in the morning. I would argue that some are hungry as well and might learn best after they have had a nice hot lunch and time to play outside. Many teachers become so accustomed to the traditional ways in the classroom that the mere mention of changing their daily routines is questioned, frowned upon and ultimately rejected. Unfortunately, students arriving late to school continued to miss out on many minutes of the core subjects that they need the most. To try to remedy this, we also ensured that learning assistance programs, guided reading and any pull-out type of program started at least 30 minutes after the entry bell. That at least gave students some extra time to get in the door

and not miss out on any extra programs offered to enhance their learning. After one year of trying a new start time and making fun activities available for students at the start of the day, our late / tardies dropped by 20%.

Because of the union contracts giving teachers the autonomy to deliver their programs, I cannot mandate that the more interesting subjects like computers, physical education, visual arts, drama or music be first on the day's agenda. I find it difficult to understand why teachers cannot make this easy change in their rooms to accommodate their learners. I still have a way to go to have teachers look at how their teaching may need to change in order to accommodate the learners in their room. Students are still expected to convert to the norms set within their individual teacher's classroom, and I am unable to break the status quo in many of the classrooms. However, we still continue to ask parents to bring their child to school on time as we need their support to have students succeed in school. It really is a relationship that must work four ways: parent, child, community and school.

The Past in my Present

As I alluded to earlier, this position at my school became not only a new leadership journey for me, but a personal journey which brought me back to my childhood in ways that I had not expected. Pain rose to the surface when I would see children that were hungry and sleep deprived, and it reminded me of the poverty I grew up in. When I discovered that children as young as seven were cooking on their own because their parents weren't home, it reminded me of the time that I got burned on the stove when I was trying to make Kraft dinner for me and my little sister. When I heard that children were out late at night without supervision at six years of age, it reminded

me of my childhood and wandering around Bowman Avenue at night with my sister. When I saw students crying because their teeth were rotten and sore, I thought of me not seeing a dentist until I was 10. When the questions came up about my cultural identity, it brought me back to denying my heritage as a child in school, and all the shame and confusion that went with that. I could relate to Jeremy and the struggle he had at school being bullied by others. Poverty was rampant in my school community and hearing the stories of abuse in some of my families and students broke my heart, made me angry, and brought me back to when I was a scared little girl who looked at school as her haven and refuge. I knew that I needed to make my school the best place it could be for our students, and give them a sense of belonging and trust.

I was grateful that after three years I had developed a close working relationship with my team at the school level, and I could count on them share the load with me. Although I knew its importance, shared leadership was initially difficult for me. But once I put the trust in my staff, my job became not only easier, but more fulfilling. Being a perfectionist who has high expectations made this a further challenge to becoming the kind of leader I aspire to be. Although I felt that I needed to prove myself to my colleagues and parents, I was also striving for self-efficacy as a leader. As one of few Aboriginal leaders, I knew that I needed to do an outstanding job and as a woman, that means feeling that you need to be “twice as good as a man” (Krüger, 2008, p. 164). I am glad that my mother instilled the importance of being educated to me. It gave me focus as a youngster and then as an adult to persevere through challenges and continue in times of doubt. Education let me escape the grips of poverty as an adult and helped me to provide a better home for my children.

Memories of my past also made me realize how biased I was in the particular way that my mother raised me. My mother did not want handouts, and yet in my school I saw some students and parents who had expectations and felt they had a *right* to obtain grocery cards, bus tickets, free clothing, and hampers from the school. When I first came to Edgewater, it was the norm for parents to ask for grocery money and we had a very large selection of used clothing that they could come in and take at will. I was raised to not accept handouts as I was told that we don't want anyone pitying us just because we were poor. My Mom found alternate ways to feed and clothe us. She was proud and felt empowered when she could do it on her own. Although I still give out the odd grocery card, I have refrained from providing bus passes to families. We went from handing out 15-20 Christmas hampers a year down to about five. I also felt that the staff should be available for students in need – particularly around the stressful time of a Christmas holiday. I did not want staff tied up making hampers and running around collecting donations for the hampers when we had students in crisis that needed them at the school. I did not want to enable parents; in addition, I knew there were other agencies that could accommodate families in need. Our school family counselor's role changed from enabling parents to providing information to them so they could seek out assistance on their own. My goal is to empower our parents so they in turn can return this power to their children who will be raised strong, confident, and proud.

My Mom made me go to school every single day unless I was physically ill. I followed this tradition with my own children (much to their dismay). I find it difficult to understand how some of our parents allow or insist their children stay home. Or they do not bring their children to school because they are too tired, slept in, or it was

inconvenient. I continue to recognize that I have come from a different place and I constantly encourage our students to come to school. Students that *want* to come to school will also convince their parents that they *need* to be here. I have found that the students have been the key to change the mindset of some of our reluctant parents. Again, I am cognizant of the upbringing I had that placed education as a top priority. Indeed, many Aboriginal parents do want their children to receive a good education, and they value education. Like all parents they want their children to enjoy school and they want the teacher to like their child. They may want to be involved in their child's education but perhaps feel they are not welcomed or they do not think they can play a part, or do not know how, and this should be the school's responsibility to address (Friedel, 1999). It becomes hard for parents if they hear their child saying they do not *want* to attend school. Because of residential school histories, parents listen and become concerned when they hear their child hates school. In fact, my experience at Edgewater shows that parents are hypersensitive to their child's complaints about the school or their teacher. Aboriginal parents have a history of not having their voices heard by the educational system (Antone, 2000; Friedel, 1999). If they spoke out they were quickly threatened and shut down. It is difficult for some to understand that today their voices are important and valued. Sometimes if a parent feels their child has been mistreated, they bypass the classroom teacher or me and go right to Chief who then alerts the school board. What could have been solved quickly at the school level gets brought to the superintendent's attention and it becomes a huge issue. I continue to work with my Aboriginal parents so they feel more at ease bringing concerns in at the school level, however, they have learned they receive a quick response if they go "above" me. This is

unfortunate that there has been a culture formed that encourages and allows parents to complain at the school district level before addressing the school. After years of being at Edgewater I can say that the district level complaints are becoming few and far between because of the degree of trust that has been built. This is a good sign and I always thank the parents who come to the school with their concerns first.

Did my district have any idea how personal and heart-wrenching this journey would be by placing me at my new school? I doubt it. No other principal would have had the experience I have had because they would have come with a different lens, and would have not have had a cultural background that needed to find its place among the new community. No other principal would have faced questions and judgments on her cultural identity. Exploring one's identity is not easy and it can come with many emotions (Kovach, 2009). No other principal would have learned as much as I have about who I am as a female Mohawk principal due to my unique history and teachings from my mother.

There were many nights when I would come home and plead for a sign from my Mom to help me to understand why I was going through my "identity crisis" and struggling to find my place. I would sometimes go to sleep and she would come to me in a dream. She would tell me to continue to "be me" and enjoy the ride. I stopped looking at my school assignment as punitive, and began to look at it as an opportunity to learn and grow. I started to experiment and try new ideas with the staff and found that most were open to change. Once the trust was built by the second year, I started to have more and more "good" days and less and less difficult days. By the middle of my third year, I couldn't even recall a bad day, as I had learned to change my perspective. I was

transparent, I started to share my leadership and trust in others, and I was reflective on the situations within my school that rattled me. I was slowly starting to transform and work became more of a pleasure. I started to see that situations that unnerved me were simply opportunities for further development and a method to hone my leadership skills. Once I allowed for the learning to occur, the focus shifted and my outlook became more positive. I have absolutely no regrets and have forgiven myself for initially having negative thoughts about my school. I am a different person now and I believe that I have transformed into a better leader than I was a few years ago. I look forward to my continued journey as a principal. I have dreamed the dream, and it is now my reality. I will continue to dream and dream big, but for now, I am enjoying the transformation into the “new” me as a Mohawk leader and woman. I know that my Mom would be proud of me, and I know that I am making a difference. That is a good feeling and a cultural teaching that I continue to live by – doing good and giving back to Aboriginal people.

Chapter X

Summary

Parallel Connections: Debra's Career

Perhaps the most significant parallel there is between my mother and me, are the way in which we chose to make a difference for people within our lines of work. Debra chose to work in the field of social services and the criminal justice system, and I in the educational realm. Growing up and hearing that you need to find a way to serve your people is one thing, but to actually *see* my mother doing this as a child was all the more meaningful. Debra saw the inequities of how Aboriginal families were being treated and discriminated against first-hand, both in her own life and those she worked with.

Because she was discriminated against when trying to find housing for her large family, she could empathize with her clients who were in the same situation. She herself was living in poverty, and so could relate to the struggles of her clients who lived in chaos, and had no food to put on the table for their children. I believe that she put so much of her efforts into helping others that she became exhausted when needing to face her own reality when she came home from work. She received much respect and praise at work, whereas at home she was met with the responsibility of raising four children with little money to support their needs. Children can be easy targets for angry and tired parents, and often physical or verbal abuse can be directed towards them.

Debra would see that Aboriginal women were being treated unfairly by the system and by their spouses. She came to form the Native Womens' Transition Centre so that battered wives and their children had a place to leave abusive relationships. In a study done through the Aboriginal Justice Inquiry conducted at the time Debra was

working as a social worker, one in 10 Canadian women were abused by their partner, and for Aboriginal women the figure was closer to one in three (Retrieved on July 25, 2010 from http://www.ajic.mb.ca/reports/final_toc.html).

In the criminal justice field Debra knew that it was important that Aboriginal men and women in prison had support, which at that time was not readily available. There were few female Aboriginal case workers working with the inmates, and the few that did work in the field were subject to intimidation from some of the non-Aboriginal men and women in the system who wanted to maintain status quo. However, Debra shared her Mohawk perspective and brought this powerful cultural knowledge to the table with integrity and humility. Debra and her colleagues supported bringing cultural healing to the Brotherhood in Stony Creek and Sisterhood at Portage la Prairie jails (K. Mallett, personal communication July 6, 2010). Debra's experience was that in addition to there being a disproportionate amount of Aboriginal people in the jails, many of them had been abused, subjects of racist and sexist stereotypes, on welfare, and in and out of the foster care system. Many had their culture stolen through the residential schools and leaving their reserves. These men and women required a different type of program that best suited their cultural backgrounds. Back in the early 1980s Debra and her colleagues were promoting teaching Aboriginal languages to inmates and later on helped to incorporate healing programs for the inmates and their victims. As mentioned earlier, Debra knew that the inmates in jail needed family support and connection for their recovery in the jail system. In particular, the female inmates that she worked with in the Portage Correctional Institution needed to maintain connections with their children and families in order to have better success once released. Obtaining a low cost alternative

for families to visit all of the jails that were located outside of Winnipeg was priority for Debra.

In speaking to Tracy Booth, executive director for the Elizabeth Fry Society in Winnipeg, she stated that the fight that Debra was engaged in the 1980s and 1990s for inmates is still prevalent today. Booth stated that as an Aboriginal woman you have to be “twice as good” due to structural racism and she stated that she can’t believe that in 2010, “the fight continues with little movement” (T. Booth, personal communication, July 9, 2010).

Debra faced structural and lateral racism in her line of work as both social worker and probation officer. She would share her frustration with the White male wardens who had little regard for the needs of the mostly Aboriginal inmates who lived in the prisons. She would share how she would get shut down when bringing her concerns to her team leaders and was told to be patient. Debra was a strong Mohawk leader who would use her voice but sometimes “if a woman bangs her fist down in the table she is a bitch and if she does not she cannot lead” (Krüger, 2008, p. 164). Debra needed to find that happy medium of knowing when to listen, speak and inform. She was reminded many times of how status quo often was maintained by either the “old boy’s network,” or as in the case of some Aboriginal organizations, the “brown boy’s network.” Her frustrations could be felt at the home level where I once heard her say *I don’t know why they hired me because I feel like I am invisible*. No matter how frustrated Debra was, she kept up the fight and was a strong advocate for social justice for over 30 years. Her desire to be of service to fellow Aboriginal people happened to be in the social service and criminal justice field, and she was known to be outspoken and

passionate in her line of work. Former board member and colleague Josie Hill from Ma Mawi commented that Debra “was always there for you, was a role model, led by example and taught others values through *doing*” (J. Hill, personal communication, July 9, 2010). This is also how my Mom taught me to be the leader I am today.

Parallel Connections: My Career

My chosen career was to serve through working in the field of education. Perhaps it was my initial first love of school that started the quest. Certainly my mother promoting and insisting on the importance of school helped as well. Seeing my Mom as a student was a good example for me while growing up. She wanted to do better and always wanted her children to have an easier road than she did. Whereas my mother chose to work with Aboriginal families in crisis and inmates in corrections, I originally chose to serve my people through working with students, and then later with teachers as an educational leader.

I have many more years to work in the education field and am a fairly new administrator, but my passion has always been to make school the best place it can be for Aboriginal students who have been treated inequitably in the school system for decades. Many teachers will say that it is hard to be open to change when they see that the pendulum will swing back at some point, so why bother taking the time to learn new initiatives. My response to that is that if we all took that attitude, then we would never grow and change for the times. Can you imagine if a doctor was trained in 1980 and then never upgraded to learn new skills, equipment or procedures? Now imagine the same for a pilot or a psychiatrist. As teachers, like myself, who were raised with a Euro-slant, it behooves us to change our mindset and be open to new learnings on how best to

approach learners who have not been successful in the system. Assimilation is racist and is not working for many students who cannot relate to the curriculum, teaching styles or structure of the programs that are presently the norm in our school system.

Racism

My mother faced much systemic racism in her life, both on a personal and professional level. I was not a part of her conversations with landlords, colleagues, bosses, principals and teachers, but I did hear and feel the aftermath of many of those encounters. My mother faced racism because of her browner skin and couldn't hide it like I did. I could suppress my Aboriginality anytime I wanted and be White and when it suited me, and vice-versa. Hiding my Mohawkness at will also meant that I grew up feeling ashamed at my actions. I was told to be proud of being Mohawk yet knew that my Mom chose my Norwegian father so I would be fair-skinned. This dichotomy made it difficult growing up and knowing where I fit in. It made it hard to be proud of my heritage when I knew it might make others think less of me. It also brought guilt in knowing that I had life better than my phenotypical Aboriginal friends and family who sometimes faced daily racial encounters. Being of mixed blood has meant that I have faced discrimination and racial slurs from both sides. My Mom always had a connection to other Aboriginal people and fitting in with them was never in question. I know that my Mom chose my father so that I could "enjoy" White privilege, but at times, I did not fit in on either the Aboriginal or White side. My Mom would find it strange that I lacked the connection with some Aboriginal people and had struggles. I suppose I would find it the same that she struggled with connections from some White people as well. I believe

that is why my Mom and I had such a close bond – we could feel each other’s pain, relate to each of our stories and understand our place of hurt.

Lawrence (2004) shares many similar stories in her study of Aboriginal mixed-blood people from Toronto and their issues with identity. Froman (2007) has comparable insights with her small study in urban Winnipeg. Experiences will differ depending on whether parents were raised or were close to their home reserves, whether they know their language, connections with families, level of education, and desire to know one’s culture. Many people of mixed-blood often do not come to fully appreciate their uniqueness until they are older (Berry, 1999), and I find the same with young students who are of “full-blood.” In schools we need to remember not to assume that students want to be singled out and questioned about their cultural background or knowledge. Some elementary students, like me, worked very hard to keep our Aboriginality a guarded secret. Other students may feel ashamed they are Aboriginal and will not have the ability to hide their culture as easily as I did. I do not think it is coincidence that I experienced less racism than my other brown-skinned family members. My fair skin has served me well, for the most part. However, as pointed out, for some people, just knowing that you are the “Other” is enough to bring racism out to rear its ugly head. As an adult, it is easier to deal with racism, but as a child, it is hard and painful, and can break your spirit. It is difficult to understand how people prejudice you, but unfortunately, in the life of an Aboriginal person, young or old, racism is common and prevalent in our society.

It is also important to work with Aboriginal students to build their self-esteem so they do not become bullies to students who are different than themselves. Finding power

in making others feel badly suggests that students lack poor self-esteem. I know that many of our Aboriginal students will face racism in their lives, as many of them are visibly Aboriginal, and we need them to feel confident, self-assured and valued in society. Teaching Aboriginal learning outcomes is one first step and helping students reach their full potential in school is another.

Recommendations

School Level

I have situated myself as a researcher and observer and can speak to the realities of an inner city school with a large percentage of Aboriginal students and the complexities that are inherent within the structure of the educational institution. I now have not only read about, but have witnessed firsthand the numerous Aboriginal students that are unable to cope or relate to the approach of pedagogy that reflects status quo norms. As I continue my journey of adopting both the servant and authentic methods of leading, I would be remiss to not make some recommendations on how schools and districts can operate to serve Aboriginal students more effectively. Within my school and along with my staff, I have made changes to the school structure to try to better meet the needs of students. This is just the start of structural changes that can be made quite easily within a school. These include the following recommendations:

- 1) Dialogue with teachers on *why* it is necessary to teach Aboriginal learning outcomes to all students. This can be done through coaching, workshops, cultural training and a regular place on each staff meeting agenda;
- 2) Show teachers *how* to teach Aboriginal content and if they require assistance, provide role models for them through a coaching model;

- 3) Purchase and incorporate relevant and necessary Aboriginal fiction and non-fiction books for personal reading throughout all curricular areas. Aboriginal students need to see themselves in the literature and the literature needs to be reflective of their truth as Aboriginal people;
- 4) Change the structure of the school day to accommodate cultural activities that may cause children to be up late;
- 5) Encourage teachers to start their day with more “fun” non-academic subject areas to entice students to arrive on time. Do not start learning support programs until later in the morning;
- 6) Provide opportunities for parents to see their children in positive ways at school, and be persistent and willing to try new methods. This can be done through invitations to the winter concert, recognition assemblies, phone calls that emphasize positive behaviors, etc.;
- 7) Utilize the Aboriginal staff or community members to assist non-Aboriginal teachers in delivering Aboriginal cultural programs. Aboriginal people can offer Aboriginal perspectives for students in a way that all can learn. I will continue to work with the Aboriginal community to help to develop locally delivered programs to our school, but realize that this will take further resources from the district level;
- 8) Encourage parents to be a part of designing the school’s code of conduct, particularly if it involves suspension-type consequences. Have a parent committee and send the code of conduct home for feedback. Let parents know

that it is open for changes and that you want them to be a part of what occurs if their child breaches the code of conduct;

- 9) Ask for parent feedback on the programs in your school. Encourage their input and allow them a voice at the table. This can be done through parent meetings, phone calls, newsletter invitation or face-to-face meetings.

District Level

At a district level, structural changes would also benefit schools that have a large percentage of Aboriginal students:

- 1) More administration time should be given to principals and their vice-principals in inner city schools and / or schools that have a significant number of Aboriginal students. The factoring of time should come from the number of staff that is supervised, not the number of students in the school. This extra time can be spent assisting teachers in the classroom and to provide relevant instructional programs;
- 2) Dialogue with the ministry of social services or child welfare system to eliminate students being interviewed and apprehended at the neighborhood school. An alternate location needs to be in place so that students and parents are not fearful a School Scoop will occur;
- 3) Place principals with considerable experience at schools with the highest needs. Placement of neophyte principals should occur in schools where there are less academic, social and emotional concerns. Inner city schools should have administrators that are committed to staying a minimum of five years so that change can occur and be sustained;

- 4) A certain proportion of library funding needs to go directly to each school each year for the purchase of quality Aboriginal materials. Resources could be provided for the librarian to cull the library for inappropriate books depicting stereotypes of Aboriginal peoples. Schools should be accountable to the district on how this money was spent. Perhaps each school could be given a list of the appropriate, recommended books for purchase;
- 5) Principals at inner city schools need to have autonomy in hiring teachers that are best suited for the clientele of the school. Schools with low test scores and other inner city issues deserve the *best* qualified teachers for the job who have an open mind and strong skill sets;
- 6) The hiring of Aboriginal teachers and support staff needs to be transparent so that every Aboriginal candidate is treated fairly. One person should not be determining who receives hiring consideration. Consider a small group of educators, parents and Aboriginal community members to be on the hiring committee for new Aboriginal personnel;
- 7) Provide a budget for hiring local Aboriginal people to work with educators to help develop local Aboriginal curricular materials and to come into the school to share their culture to all students. This budget needs to be sustained and committed for a period of time;
- 8) Aboriginal cultural sensitivity training should be in place for all teachers, administrators and support staff in the system. This will assist with the *why* we need to teach Aboriginal outcomes in the schools and provide educators

with important, historical background information that begins the process of changing the Euro-slant of some educators;

- 9) Funding for services such as speech and language pathologists, occupational therapists, and counseling should be provided for the number of students who *need* the services, not on how many students are in the school. The formula needs to change to students who require the service versus the FTE headcount at the school;
- 10) Eliminate labeling children in kindergarten for Learning Assistance or English as a Second Dialect services. Having students pre-labeled before they are met or assessed is racist and categorizes all Aboriginal students as coming into the school with a deficit.

I understand that budgets are as constraining as the union contracts. However, I believe that if we are going to make any sort of substantive positive change for Aboriginal students in school districts, we all need to “walk the walk” and not just “talk the talk.” Until schools and districts address that there are unique needs in schools with larger numbers of Aboriginal students, schools will continue to fail our students and the cycle will not be broken. As such, more funding and resources need to go into schools that have a larger percentage of Aboriginal students. We cannot continue to deliver the same services and expect to get different results.

Changing the Status Quo within Organizations

When Aboriginal people are hired into positions of leadership, they likely believe that they are going to make a positive difference in that new position. There needs to be job satisfaction, and as the case is with many Aboriginal people, helping and

being of service to others is a part of being spiritually healthy and is likely part of their cultural teachings. It can be difficult if the organization does not value your Aboriginality and limits your ability to lead and progress in any meaningful ways that allow you to actually help your people.

My Mom saw the conflict of values when she worked in the justice system, and I see it in the educational system. It certainly looks good on paper to see that a specific number of Aboriginal people are being hired to an organization. That may be because of funding incentives, community considerations, or employment equity practices. An Aboriginal leader needs to be patient and / or reconsider if they think that the system is going to change quickly. Leaders working in a bureaucracy maintain and protect status quo particularly when an “outsider” comes on board with differing viewpoints and values that question common practice. Of course the “insider” (those already in the system or organization) sees things from a particular slant, and it will take patient and unrelenting Aboriginal leaders to be able to maneuver or tread the waters so they don’t drown and disappear.

As an Aboriginal leader in my district I have learned to use my cultural teachings to observe and listen better, and to speak when I believe I will be heard and need to be heard. I do not want to disappear and not share the message on how and why things need to change for our Aboriginal students, and so I have learned to be patient. As my Mom taught me to do as a child, I speak up when things matter and am thoughtful with my words. I also need to look after all aspects of my “self” by keeping spiritually, physically, intellectually and emotionally balanced as in the Medicine Wheel. I have survived the waters by having formed a close relationship to my auntie and having a

loving family and close circle of friends. I have to believe that I can make a difference in my work and in my organization; otherwise I would not be here. Things take time and as much as we aim for social change, we need to continue the fight, use our voice and not give up our dreams.

Reflections

I relate to Caroline Ellis in her sharing of what happens to her when she becomes upset, “Usually when I am rattled, my first impulse is, don’t listen. I shut down. It’s only later that I can see being rattled as a sign that I might have something to learn” (2002, p. 401). I can say that I had a lot more to learn in my first few years of administration than I thought I did. I learned the importance of using my cultural teachings and being open to learn new teachings through my Aboriginal community. I learned that although I have high expectations, I needed to be gentle with myself and forgive myself for making mistakes. I also needed to remember that although times may get difficult, it is only through patience and perseverance that organizational changes can be made. I have had to pick myself up, brush myself off, and become emotionally and spiritually ready for the next challenge. I continue to value my treasured relationships I have in my life and know that I am not alone in my quest. There are other Indigenous leaders, scholars and my ancestors who are there fighting the good fight right alongside me. I have slowly been unraveling and understanding the grips of colonization and know that through my Indigenous perspective, I can be a strong advocate for Aboriginal students and their families. This story is meant for all of those who want to make a difference for Aboriginal students in our education system. Even though it was difficult, I was willing to “go there” so others could appreciate my reality.

Writing this autoethnography was complex, but it was also rewarding, healing and very much a spiritual experience. It was incredibly emotional and many times when I was writing about an experience I was brought right back to the moment of when it actually occurred. My husband would sometimes come and check on me when I was writing only to find me sitting and crying quietly in my office chair. The memories were vivid and my emotions were raw during the writing process. Keeping my journals was extremely valuable for me as I wrote because I could see and feel the thought process the more I read my excerpts. I realized through my reflective journal that I would often speak too quickly in a situation that might have been best dealt with in silence. As a leader, you sometimes think that you need to come up with an immediate answer or response when perhaps waiting and taking the time to self-reflect is the ultimate solution.

Years ago when I first began exploring methodologies, I became intrigued with what an autoethnography could offer me as a researcher and Mohawk woman. The more I learned about it, the more I realized how important it was for me to share my story through a storytelling methodology. I was warned that it would be difficult, and it definitely was. I did not realize how caught up I would become in my writing, how easy the thoughts flowed, and how cathartic the process would be. I believe that a lot of my tears were that of the grief of losing my Mom. It was also grief of feeling that I lost some of my childhood. I felt sorry for my mother and yet was so grateful that we remained close for many of my adult years. When my auntie read my first draft, I cried again when she shared her thoughts. Her words moved me and solidified my belief that I did my mother's memory justice. She shared that she too had cried throughout parts of

the story, but also laughed and had a much better understanding of her sister and her nieces and nephew. She felt that my story honored my mother in such a way that it spoke the truth, shared her difficult journey, and showed how remarkable she was in her line of work.

One of the difficulties I had in this autoethnographic writing was determining how much information to share with readers, particularly when it involved my mother, home life as a child, or my experiences with other family members. In my story I wanted to share the realities and the pain that many events caused me in my childhood, and part of this pain comes from sharing the truth as it occurred. However, in this type of academic writing, I was limited in what stories I could share because of the demands and expectations of the university. Even with autoethnographic writing, parameters are set in place that can limit the sharing of authentic lived stories so that no harm can come to others. Although it is my story, other people are in my story and they need to be protected. This was the difficult part of the writing because although there were more situations I would have liked to have shared, I needed to carefully consider if sharing the story was helpful, harmful or necessary. Even though the situation might have been signifying and thought provoking, it did not necessarily mean that it was appropriate to share. I feel that the chosen stories I shared were worth telling and can be learned from.

I would not be who I am today had I not have been subject to poverty, abuse, racism, stereotypes, shame and alienation. Intermingled through all of that is the joy, laughter, triumph, pride, and self-love I gained as a Mohawk woman. When a reader reads my story I would hope that they can see that I was raised by a very strong, loving Mohawk woman who needed to make sacrifices in her life. I never held it against her

that she was a workaholic. It was understandable that as one of few Aboriginal females in her line of work, she needed to work extra hard to prove herself. In my present work, I too, feel that I need to work harder than others because of my own high expectations that I place upon myself as being one of few Indigenous female principals.

I am thankful to the Creator that my Mom was the strong warrior woman that she was and taught me many valuable lessons and teachings that have helped me to be the person I am today. Our relationship evolved and deepened in her last five years of life and when she passed away we were very close. There is not a day that I do not miss and think of her. I keep her picture at work and when I need extra “strength” I wear her perfume and really feel her presence. I truly believe that I am here today first and foremost because of my upbringing, core values, and steadfast determination to continue to do good for our people – and I thank my Mom for that every day.

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