

Research or *In-Search*?
**A non-Aboriginal researcher's retrospective of a study on
Aboriginal parent involvement**

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While the non-Aboriginal person can be very well-meaning and have a whole cultural understanding, taken a workshop and definitely knows what culture is about, lots of times, I'm going to use a phrase, they just don't get it. (comment by Aboriginal research participant; Stelmach, 2006, p. 232)

Since non-Aboriginals and Aboriginals embrace different world views, some may claim—as Aboriginal participants in my study of parent involvement did—that non-Aboriginals seeking Aboriginal perspectives *just don't get it*. Drawing on Luce-Kapler's literary notion of syncope, I reflect on my experiences as a non-Aboriginal researcher interviewing five Aboriginal women about the parents' role in school improvement to suggest in-search, which involves exercising an intentional or directed vulnerability regarding one's inability to know or make definitive claims, may bring about the conditions to bridge Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal communities.

INTRODUCTION AND PURPOSE

The appropriateness of non-Aboriginal researchers pursuing knowledge from or about Aboriginal Peoples¹ comes into question when one considers the influence that epistemological and ontological paradigms have on how one interprets the world. Claims such as the one prefacing this article, that non-Aboriginals “just don't get it,” suggest that despite the development of Aboriginal research protocol (Kenny, 2004; Menzies, 2001), the non-Aboriginal researcher faces what some scholars have termed an “enigma” (Ladkin, 2005, p. 109) or “dilemma” (Chesney, 2001, p. 127) of researcher subjectivity. In the case of non-Aboriginal and Aboriginal research relationships, subjectivity is complex and potentially interfering because Aboriginals and non-Aboriginals operate within unique cosmologies, epistemologies, and

ontologies (Stewart-Harawira, 2005). Can anything be gained from non-Aboriginals' research of Aboriginal perspectives?

Drawing on my experiences as a non-Aboriginal researcher interviewing five First Nations, Métis, and Inuit women in a qualitative case study about parent involvement² (Stelmach, 2006), I argue that non-Aboriginal researchers may contribute to developing mutually beneficial relationships with these communities if they turn the research focus inward. Specifically, it was important for me to examine my own approaches throughout the research process, including the study design, interview questions, questioning techniques, and responses to participants' comments. Doing this helped me to become aware that my relationships with the research participants and the data indexed my historical and social locatedness, and the epistemological and ontological trappings of my cultural experience. Further, I identified the stronghold of Enlightenment³ thinking in my Eurocentric upbringing; my belief that one can know objective truths about the world was challenged in my experiences interviewing these five Aboriginal women. I acknowledged my limited understanding of Aboriginal world views, but more significantly, that the source of my limited understanding was the Eurocentric lens through which my world is filtered. I describe the acknowledgement of limited understanding as vulnerability because, as I saw it, I needed to challenge my own assumptions about understanding others. Ironically, I learned, understanding myself was integral to understanding these five Aboriginal women.

The objective of this article is to share what I learned in hindsight: interviewing the Aboriginal women and analyzing their transcripts was a form of "in-search," a meta-examination of myself as a researcher and former school teacher, and the processes undertaken to conduct the study. Reflexivity and self-reflexivity (Steier, 1991) are central to my discussion. My aim is twofold: I raise the possibility that non-Aboriginals can learn from the reflexive *process* of research, which is perhaps more important and preferable than non-Aboriginal researchers claiming *findings* about Aboriginal populations. I also offer what I learned about how Aboriginal parents are positioned in schools, and how Eurocentric posturing, such as my own, contribute to this positioning. Encouraging educators to be self-reflexive is a complementary aim.

The ideas are carried by a river metaphor. My concern in this article with multiplicity and reflexivity drew me to the innumerable, sometimes

paradoxical ways in which water has been understood through time and culture. Water is celebrated and revered across many cultures as the source from which life emerges, as a pure and purifying element, as the liquid spirit of baptism or the exorcising bath of witchcraft (Biedermann, 1994). Water's shifting, fluid nature was for me an appropriate analogy for my experiences of interpreting these five Aboriginal women's responses to my questions about parent involvement. Like the tide that flows forward and sinks back, understanding within my logocentric⁴ frame seemed out of my reach. And like so much of river life exists beneath the surface, what I was being taught by these women was submerged in the depths of my own assumptions. Until I let the current of the conversations carry me—embraced what I call intentional or directed vulnerability—I was unaware of being adrift in my Eurocentric research goals. Thus, as water serves to create balance—ecological and physiological—it was a useful way for me to share my research experiences and to offer them as a possibility for how Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal parent experiences can be respected in schools.

THE RESEARCH STUDY AND "RECIPROCATORS"

The research study which afforded me my "self-reflexive moment" was an exploration of how parents and students defined the role of parents in secondary school improvement in a northern, rural context in a Western Canadian province (Stelmach, 2006). The community in which I conducted my research was surrounded by a number of First Nations Reserves and Métis settlements, some of whose children attended the school where my research was concentrated. As part of my study I interviewed five Aboriginal women. Though these women were not parents in the school where I conducted my research, school or district personnel provided their names to me because of their direct involvement with the school division. Given how these women were embedded in the research, I have come to view them as reciprocators, a term first invoked by Ortega y Gasset (1957), to reflect the co-constructivist nature of qualitative research.

All reciprocators were invited to provide pseudonyms. Dolly (Inuit) and Heidi (Cree) were Elders. Esmé (Métis) and Bibi (Cree) were school trustees. Esmé's children had graduated from the secondary school where I based my research. Marlena (Métis) was a community employee who provided social support to Aboriginal families. The focus of the interviews was to elicit mul-

ticultural conceptualizations of “parent involvement,” and to gain insight into the Aboriginal parental roles in supporting their children’s academic achievement.

CROSS-CULTURAL RESEARCH

There has been a surge in scholarly interest in improving understanding of cross-cultural contexts in disciplines such as anthropology (Menziez, 2004), criminology (Garland, Spalek, & Chakraborti, 2006), geography (Hodge & Lester, 2006), and medicine (Chesney, 2001; Langhout, 2006), as well as in examining the dynamics of cross-cultural collaborative research teams (Park & Lahman, 2003). Reflection and reflexivity are central concerns in studies of this nature (Ladkin, 2005; Langhout, 2006). An increasing recognition of researchers’ power and privilege over those they study (Veroff & DiStefano, 2002) has prompted arguments for researchers to “out [their] presence” (Finlay, 2002, p. 531). Even so, it has not been commonplace for non-Aboriginal scholars to forefront or explore the vulnerability I describe when they write about their research with Aboriginal Peoples.

The notion of researcher presence has particular significance for non-Aboriginal educational researchers interested in learning Aboriginal perspectives about education. A history of colonization combined with what some Indigenous scholars perceive as insidious cognitive imperialism in past and contemporary curricula and school governance (Battiste, 1998) suggests non-Aboriginal researchers must exercise vigilance to conduct respectful and non-colonizing research. While current scholarship on researcher subjectivity offers a mechanism or mindset for conducting cross-cultural research, the autoethnographic sensibility of reflective analysis (Atkinson, 2006) stops short of describing a meta process that might support such cross-cultural research endeavours. Having clearer access to one’s assumptions may help a researcher understand how / why she is approaching research with cultures different than hers. Central to my argument is that researchers must do more than “out their presence” to others; researchers must “out themselves” *to themselves* to understand the world view which underpins their actions and assumptions. In other words, self-reflexivity is key, not only in research, but in educational practice as well.

SELF-REFLEXIVITY

I am inspired by Luce-Kapler’s (2003) literary notion of syncope. She used

this concept to describe poetry as an “interruption” (§ 9) whereby “attention is drawn to what has previously been in the background” (§ 8). By definition, research presupposes an object and subject whereby the latter examines and attempts to understand more clearly and fully the former. Though reflection is inherent in educational research and practice, self-reflexivity requires a deeper, more extensive gaze inward at “objects” not typically considered within the parameters of a study (Gergen & Gergen, 1991).

Reflexivity involves “bending back on itself” (Steier, 1991, p. 2). Self-reflexivity is achieved by examining and evaluating how one is locked into oneself, and how one’s theoretical and linguistic commitments influence research posturing (Gergen & Gergen, 1991). As Steier (1991) noted, self-reflexivity makes possible the inclusion of self in a research project:

Research becomes a way of unconcealing our own tacit world, including the constraints that we have self-imposed....Our reflexivity thus reveals itself as an awareness of the recognition that we allow ourselves to hear what our subjects are telling us, not by imposing our categories on them, but by trying to see how our categories may not fit. (pp. 7-8)

Luce-Kapler (2003), in describing the arrhythmic flow of poetry as a syn-copated interruption, provides a helpful parallel:

The concept of interruption is an important one for we cannot hope to provoke without first getting attention and halting the commonplace and taken-for-granted language...Where the rhythm changes, we find the moment of interpretation and our attention is drawn to what has previously been in the background. (§ 8)

Significantly, what I learned while interviewing five Aboriginal women was not anticipated. I expected to learn Aboriginal perspectives on parental roles in school improvement; however, during my data collection I realized that as a non-Aboriginal person with limited understanding of Indigenous literature and ways of knowing, I could not “capture” their voices. I realized the need to challenge my Enlightenment assumptions about my ability to know; in other words, to be vulnerable. I turned instead to myself as I began to “see differently and sometimes uncomfortably” (Luce-Kapler, 2003, § 9). My self-reflexive processes were integral to this unanticipated learning, and represented for me the stopping of my “breath...that [left me] wondering before coming to understand” (§ 9). This stance, I believe, gave me indirect access to new understanding of schools’ limited construction of parental roles.

The paradox of my attempt to be reflexive is that I could only do so from within the perspective of who I am. In Beeman's (2006) account, my expression comes through the "linear and analytic language of Modwestcult" (p. 13)⁵. Because language is my instrument through which I am trying to articulate what I feel I have learned, I am aware that it at the same time creates a limitation to my understanding, and that it was undoubtedly powerful enough to pull me unconsciously into modes of codification and/or contradiction.

STUDY DESIGN: PUSHING THE RIVER

Intellectually I understood the legacy of "forced relocation, systematic discrimination, and expropriation of resources and territory" (Menzies, 2001, p. 23) endured by Aboriginal Peoples, and how this influenced trust. Yet, I naïvely ignored history as a factor in my research. For example, I imposed my time frame on data collection. Part way through my research I extended my on-site data collection period by a month thinking this would be sufficient to achieve my research goals. Assuming my research was a series of time-bound tasks, however, exposed my logocentric tendency to push my agenda in a linear direction and at a heightened pace. I centered myself in the research and thus overlooked the time necessary to build relationships. Given the history of the colonial research gaze (Kenny, 2004; Kowalski, Thurston, Verhoef, & Rutherford, 1996; Menzies, 2001) taking the time to demonstrate my objectives and allowing potential reciprocators the time to assess whether my objectives were honourable was paramount. Further, a study designed with Aboriginal parents more suitably aligns with appropriate research design because it may de-privilege a Eurocentric approach (Kenny, 2004).

My attempts to push the river, so to speak, thwarted, rather than abetted my intentions. I orchestrated the research process and reciprocators through lockstep motions. I initially failed to recognize that understanding could not be produced at will or collected and stored like a commodity. Rather, understanding was tidal—a quick touch upon and retreat from the shores of my mind. I was overwhelmed by waves of insight, then frustrated as what felt like clarity leaked out. Coming to terms with research as a fluid process with which I had to flow was a critical reflection.

I relied on my former role as a teacher in the reciprocators' community

to establish familiarity when I telephoned Aboriginal parents to invite them into my study. I assumed that having lived there would put me in their favour. While this may have been effective with non-Aboriginal parents, it sometimes had a contradictory impact on Aboriginal parents. *How* was I familiar to Aboriginal parents? Was my legacy as the teacher who only called home with negative reports? Had I contacted Aboriginal parents at all? Furthermore, did using the telephone as a first contact hinder the development of trust? Kirkness (1998) and Friedel (1999) argued that Aboriginal parents are seldom asked to be part of educational matters regarding their children, and I wondered to what extent conventional school-home communications could explain this oversight. Do educators assume that parents who do not have telephones or do not contact the school are not interested in their children's schools? Upon what criteria are parent representatives chosen for school committees?

My procedure for sampling Aboriginal parents provided some insight into the aforementioned question. Kirkness (1998) emphasized that Aboriginal parents must be part of redesigning an educational system for their children which is based on their traditional worldviews. Further, Friedel (1999) pointed out statistics for Aboriginal children and youth are overwhelmingly connected, and that Aboriginal parents are often blamed for this. For this reason, I interpreted a connection between the clash of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal worldviews, and the lack of success experienced by Aboriginal students. I felt it was important to include Aboriginal participants who could help me understand their worldviews, and explain the experiences of working with a non-Aboriginal education system. To generate a list of Aboriginal parents I consulted with the district and school personnel. Three that I chose from that list were a Métis parent who declared a mainstream lifestyle, and two European legal guardians of Aboriginal children. These three were highly recommended, but considering that two of them were European and one claimed to be Aboriginal by birth but not lifestyle, I wondered about how the school personnel I consulted perceived Aboriginal representation. More than once when I asked educators to suggest key reciprocators, they suggested parents who frequented the school. Were these parents recommended because they were deemed cooperative? Easy to get in touch with? What did representation mean to these teachers? Perhaps the school did not want me to talk to people who might be critical of the school.

While the three parents were informative as parents of Aboriginal children, they could not speak to the issues *as* Aboriginal parents, or as Aboriginal parents who connected with those roots. The Métis woman, for example, told me she “grew up White” and in conversation with her I developed the impression that she did not consider her way of being as Aboriginal. Moreover, they were parents for whom school and teachers appeared approachable, and who reported success when advocating for their children. They did not resemble the profile of the “disconnected” parent others had mentioned, the very perspective I sought.

Esmé problematized the issue of Aboriginal representation in this way: “Oftentimes what happens as Aboriginal people is you’re asked to sit on a committee because of what you look like. Not necessarily because of what you know or what you think” (Stelmach, 2006, p. 216). Looking back on my educator experiences as an educator, I assumed that someone who “looked the part” of an Aboriginal could fill committee positions. As Middleton (2003) has noted about Native Americans, however, the term “Aboriginal” only surfaced in response to the need for political unity. One Aboriginal does not speak for all any more than a non-Aboriginal person does. I had not thought before about the prevailing assumption among non-Aboriginal educators and policy makers that Aboriginals are a singular, homogeneous political group. Dolly, for example, articulated her dilemma about participating in the school’s cultural activities:

To me, when I first started going to the schools, I felt I shouldn’t be the one doing it as an Inuvialuit. It should be the people from here talking to the students and coming into the school about how they lived long ago here. (Stelmach, 2006, p. 217)

Dolly’s apprehension about sharing her knowledge suggested Aboriginals do not assume similarity among all Aboriginal Peoples. Esmé pointed out that the “one size fits all” approach to Aboriginal studies is ineffective (Stelmach, 2006, p. 248). Significantly, all five of these Aboriginal women emphasized distinctiveness among Aboriginals and clarified that they spoke only for themselves.

Cultural representation in research is intricately more complex than I assumed in my research design. These five women in my sample represented Vizenor and Lee’s (1999) “survivance, the idea of survival and resistance” (p. 79), and some, such as those who had experienced the residential school

system, were able to articulate a matrix of struggle and success. I was aware, however, that I had not designed my study in a way to gain trust from parents whose experience with the school system was predominantly a struggle. To clarify, Marlena laid out some important contrasts between herself and the families she worked with:

Some of [the families] have been around for a long, long time, and I think have gone through every hoop there is—Child Welfare, [Aboriginal family programs]—and it just doesn't work because I don't think they understand where they're coming from. They don't live even as I live. I have my own way of living. They don't live the same way. (Stelmach, 2006, p. 221)

From experience I knew the type of parents Marlena worked with were not "consulted" about education problems or solutions. Marlena further suggested that "a lot of [parents] feel that they're not going to be heard" (Stelmach, 2006, p. 221), emphasizing that parents' lack of confidence led them to believe their children's teachers would not like them, and therefore it was futile for them to engage in school. She debunked common perceptions that Aboriginal people lack initiative:

They don't accept help that easily. They're proud people in a sense. I've had some people say they're pig-headed or stupid. They're not stupid or pig-headed, they just don't know. They're scared. Most agencies come with that stigma that if you deal with them you're going to be involved with Child Welfare—the people that will rule you and run you. And they don't want to be part of it. (Stelmach, 2006, p. 221)

Her assessment of the situation explained for me Aboriginal parents' vulnerability, and indicated what prompted their silence. Her example conjured up a revelation my former colleague shared when an Aboriginal mother admitted at a truancy hearing she did not send her child to school because she could not afford to supply him with lunch. Lawrence-Lightfoot (2003) shared similar examples of parents projecting educationally unsupportive behaviour to mask deeper domestic circumstances. Is it a keen sense of awareness of Eurocentric definitions of "good parenting" that drives Aboriginal people to avoid situations that endanger their independence and family life? This possibility reinforced for me the importance of building time into research projects to understand why some Aboriginal parents remain unasked, and to develop non-threatening research methods that will allow Aboriginals to

speak freely or through other modes of communication. This prompted me to be self-reflexive about my methodological choices and to be vulnerable to my self-interested motivations in the research design.

My research plans took for granted mutual agreement, and only toward the end of my stay at the research location did I realize I was hyper-focused on driving my agenda. For example, I was interested in interviewing a male Elder from the community. Over several telephone conversations he denied receiving the requested information about the study. I interpreted his response as a rejection to my study, a consequence of me forging ahead with a plan that lacked reciprocity: these were *my* questions based on *my* ideas about Aboriginal educational needs. I failed to gain the Elder's trust.

Johnson (1984) and Hutchinson (cited in Kowalsky, Thurston, Verhoef, & Rutherford, 1996) described four stages of entry into a community where cultural sensitivity is critical: stopping, waiting, transition, and entry. The Elder claiming he did not receive my correspondence about the study "stopped" me. I wondered whether I moved through to the entry stage with relative ease with the five Aboriginal women because they were comfortable in both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal worlds. Furthermore, did I select these women because I had assurance that they would agree to participate?

The presumption of entry into individuals' or communities' lives was my oversight, but also, it is implicit in research protocol such as ethics applications which requests researchers to indicate how reciprocators will be given the opportunity to opt out. The presupposition that ethical obligations become important *after* a participant has given consent is characteristic of non-Aboriginal methods, whereas Indigenous researchers consider the ethical responsibility of research *begins* with designing a research project with Aboriginal Peoples (Kenny, 2004). Respect for Aboriginals' historical and social contexts, world views, philosophies, and values implies that research should grow out of a dialogue with Aboriginal communities (Kenny, 2004; Kowalsky, Thurston, Verhoef, & Rutherford, 1996; Menzies, 2001), but my way as an educator and researcher treated dialogue as an afterthought. I equated the school division's permission to conduct the study with permission to 'enter' into Aboriginals' lives. I now believe it is incumbent upon non-Aboriginal researchers to engage Aboriginals in the decision to embark on a research study to avoid perpetuating the attitude of colonial predecessors. I learned about the fragility of trust, and the way of the water.

In other ways research institutions have systematized inappropriate and presumptuous approaches to research regarding Aboriginal people. Indigenous and other scholars have noted the impediments of the linearity of non-Indigenous research practices (Hampton, 1995; Kenny, 2000; Menzies, 2001). Guidelines make the process clinical, and the assumption that principal investigators own the data violates the Aboriginal belief in knowledge as a co-creation to be shared among the community (Menzies, 2001). I felt this firsthand in this study, particularly with the Elders because I assumed they felt a responsibility as cultural guardians. The seemingly innocuous act of presenting reciprocators with a consent form delivered contrasting affects for me when I interviewed Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal reciprocators. Whereas the ethical preamble served as an ice breaker and a means to ease into the interview act with non-Aboriginals, introducing the documents to Aboriginals felt abrupt, offensive, and inappropriate. Not only did research guidelines interrupt the flow of conversation, but my preoccupation with rules and procedures distracted me from being present to the reciprocators' stories. Consider the following excerpt from my field notes:

I was nervous about asking whether I could tape [Dolly] or get her consent, but when she showed me a book of Elders from a project she worked on, I flipped to a page and serendipitously found that the interviews were taped...and knew that I could ask her to tape the conversation. (Stelmach, 2006, p. 224)

This entry in my field notes illustrated my schizophrenic pose of listening to Dolly while listening to myself. This was due to my concern with the procedural aspects of my research, which speaks to the parameters of my epistemological comfort zone.

How do these experiences relate to educational policy and practice? Educational policy and practice, like research programs, have logocentric tendencies (e.g. linear steps, entrenched time frames and schedules, etc.). Although educators and policy makers may recognize the need to build positive relationships with Aboriginal communities, the focus on quantitative measures to assess initiatives make relationships seem like a perfunctory objective. The river is always being pushed. Furthermore, the schedule of reporting student learning outcomes, which has become a mechanism of public school accountability, embodies postpositivist thinking. Postpositivism assumes truth is objective, measurable, and time-bound (Zammito, 2004). Learning

must happen by certain dates. To develop relationships with parents, patience is required. But also, relationships are difficult to measure, and are often considered 'soft' outcomes. Thus, the river seems pushed in another way: Parents, while stated as co-responsible for their children's learning, are potentially channeled into pre-scripted behaviour in support of ministerial or educator desires to claim educational excellence as defined by postpositivist, Eurocentric assumptions.

WHITE WATER RAPIDS...SAFETY IN MY BOAT?

Through my research I discovered that seeking "safety in my boat" was the Siamese twin of "pushing the river." I sought control over the research process: I wanted to ask the questions and expected the interviewee to provide direct answers. Believing adherence to my interview schedule would lead me to the information I needed to have caused me to completely miss opportunities to explore in depth reciprocators' responses. This was particularly the case with the first interview I conducted with Dolly.

Dolly described the parents' role in their children's learning as follows:

They bring them out in the land in the summer time where they're teaching their children to go whaling, fishing, berry picking....[my dad] brought us back out onto the land where we did muskrat trapping with him and my grandmother. (Stelmach, 2006, p. 226)

Missing the relevance of Dolly's answer, I rephrased my question and asked, "What is the parents' job in helping their students become successful?" She replied, "I think they should let them know who they are. Let them be proud of who they are no matter if they are Aboriginal Peoples or not." I was admittedly somewhat disappointed and confused when I left the first interview with Dolly because even though I was fascinated with her stories, I worried that I did not get the answers to my questions. I did not know the significance of the physicality of being "out on the land" experiencing it through one's senses; therefore, I did not connect Aboriginal ecological and experiential ways of knowing (Antone, 2003; Cajete, 2000, 2005; Doige, 2003; Hare, 2003; Jojola, 2004; Kirkness, 1998) and the parents' role. I felt frustrated by these currents that swept up from under me and capsized my plans.

Upon reflection, though it seemed Dolly was meandering around my questions, she *was* answering them, and her recurrent stories about fishing, trapping, whaling, and hunting with her father exemplified meaningful par-

ent involvement. I needed to let go of thinking there was *an* answer to my questions that had to do with volunteering or school meetings; I needed to let go of my assumption that I could make the current of conversation flow in my direction. I began to question how I defined parental roles.

Kirkness (1998) made a point about mainstream education that suggested why I could not immediately understand Dolly's recollections about being out on the land with her father as a comment about education and the role of Aboriginal parents. Kirkness postulated, "We are uncomfortable when too much time is spent outdoors learning from the land, because we have been conditioned to believe that education occurs in the classroom" (p. 13). Containment, control, curriculum coverage, and closure characterize European methods of teaching and learning, which differs from Dolly's memories of her education:

When I was growing up I learned from the land. My grandmother and my dad—I was raised up on the land...When you are raised out on the land you learn a lot of things. It's just like an education. (Stelmach, 2006, p. 227)

The formality of Western education stands in stark contrast to the lessons Dolly naturally learned beside her father and grandmother in the outdoors. Her comment, "It's just like an education" is redolent of the cognitive imperialism about which Battiste (1998) writes to describe the validation of Eurocentric foundations of knowledge as the only legitimate way of knowing. I interpreted Dolly's statement as the internalization of the discourse that equates Western schooling with education.

Also, as indicated by her earlier statement, her father taking her out of school during the spring was considered an important part of her education, rather than detraction from it. Perfect attendance, however, is often celebrated as a sign of student success in schools. Schooling is conflated with education, which infringes on the ecological nature of Aboriginal education (Cajete, 1994). Furthermore, Bibi and Heidi confirmed what I had read about the importance of family and community. "The first thing [responsibility] is the home, second is the school," Heidi said. Therefore, Aboriginals' absence from school, perceived by educators as truancy, reflects the Aboriginal priority of family and community (Wilson & Napoleon, 1998). In our education system, chronically absent students are often seen as having 'bad' parents.

As my interviews with these Aboriginal women progressed, I became

more reflexive during my observations at the school. Kirkness' (1998) distinctions between Aboriginal and mainstream educational methods became clearer to me. My experience in a class called Northern Cultures⁶ was eye-opening. When I began my data collection an Aboriginal teacher was instructing the class, and I recorded the following field notes about my observations:

At the beginning, the students attempt to form a circle....The students definitely understand the procedures and seemed to respect it. I find it ironic that they will hold each other and themselves in line and wait for their turn to talk, but they won't conduct themselves in that way once the talking circle moment has ended.

I was interested in how the lesson emerged from a talking circle. The students were self-disciplined and collegial. When the talking circle disbanded, however, students chatted out of order and I felt disharmony in the room. This experience encouraged me to think about how the talking circle invoked respect, and whether/how this teaching method considers a different mode of *being* (Beeman, 2006).

When I returned to the school in the following school year and asked to observe the same course, the new non-Aboriginal teacher hesitated because he thought they might be out on a field trip. My field note recordings indicated a transformation in my thinking:

It was funny that when I asked him (the teacher) if I could observe a class that he said he had to think about it because sometimes they are out of the classroom going on hikes looking at medicinal plants, as if I thought education only really happened in the classroom.

My reflections resonated with Kirkness's (1998) description of mainstream education as formally organized, specially designed, and as a confined space and activity. The second experience in the class was comparatively different, for there was no talking circle, and the authoritative stance of the adult was made clear by the physical arrangement of the classroom and the location of the teacher when he addressed the students. This suggested a philosophical difference between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal teaching; whereas, the talking circle seemed to facilitate a sense of equality among learners, I automatically fell into an evaluative position in the conventional setting. I was comfortable with surveillance and began to see that correction is a critical part of Western education compared to Aboriginal traditions

that “never seek to force their understanding on [others]” (Hester, 2004, p. 187).

The connection between these incidents and my initial frustrations interviewing Dolly was my educator background and Eurocentric inclinations. I recognized myself the second time around in the Northern Cultures; the student-teacher dichotomy, the linear arrangement of the desks, and the separation of “fun” from “serious” learning resembled my own classrooms and epitomized an adherence to the Eurocentric principles of authority, didacticism, and hierarchy (Calliou, 1998; Battiste, 1998). Eurocentric organization was my approach to a research experience that felt tumultuous. I valued order and hierarchy; thus, I felt I should lead and Dolly should follow. Is this the arrangement that educators and policy makers expect for their relationships with Aboriginal parents? The significance of not knowing what guides educators’ practices lies in the unquestioning way Aboriginal parents are asked to contribute to educational goals that privilege one definition of education. When policy makers pledge to consult with Aboriginal communities from whose epistemology does the conversation emerge and grow?

IN THE WAKE OF RESEARCH

In turning a self-reflexive eye on my experiences researching Aboriginal perspectives on parental roles in school improvement, I “call[ed] into question what [I] have believed” (Luce-Kapler, 2003, ¶ 24) about research and Aboriginal perspectives. My research experience alerted me to the way my Western values and socio-historical positioning have shaped the epistemological, ontological, and cosmological paradigm that has become my subjectivity and serves as my point of reference in all my human and natural interactions. I steered the research process in directions I assumed it should go, and believed there was a clearly defined destination.

Three key reflections surfaced from my research. First, my intent to “capture” Aboriginal perspectives objectified Indigenous ways of knowing. The objectification resulted in my basing Aboriginal parents’ participation on hegemonic expectations emerging from White, middle class constructs of school (Pushor & Murphy, 2004). Parents who behaved differently were automatically framed as problematic. Such assumptions mislead non-Aboriginal educators/researchers like me into searching for ways to “fit” Aboriginal culture into existing practices.

Heidi helped me to realize the importance of embracing one's own history, circumstances, limitations, and potential. She felt it was inappropriate to assume Aboriginals and non-Aboriginals could cross over into each other's world views; rather, she emphasized knowledge and appreciation of self:

Once you are an Aboriginal person you can never be anything else.

That was given to you. And you in Western society as a White person, that is your own gift. That's what you are. You could never be an Aboriginal person. The same as I could never be you. But we could work together. (Stelmach, 2006, p. 232)

Heidi spoke to the notion of confluence. She clarified for me, "It's not necessarily to have to change that curriculum; it's just to add onto it." When Aboriginal parents said they wanted their children to learn about culture, it did not mean they discounted conventional school offerings. What Aboriginal children and parents have to do to be successful is "walk in both worlds." In other words, the notion of confluence does not mean one perspective is deemed better, but rather, there is recognition that both have value. My assumption that I could understand fully Aboriginals' perspectives and experiences, and in return, help them understand what is needed to improve education, stemmed from my thinking of Aboriginal educational issues as "problem" and "solution." The potential contrast between Aboriginal world views and the non-Aboriginal structure of many schools influences students' and parents' experiences in a way a non-Aboriginal cannot comprehend. A productive dialogue, I now understand, can only come about if I and other non-Aboriginals see the differences as integrated parts in a productive dialogue.

Bringing Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal conversations together implies the concept of balance. As Zwicky (1992) aptly suggests, "To balance is not to oppose" (p. 372). But how can non-Aboriginal educators and policy makers build understanding from within an education system that is founded upon Western notions of teachers as experts? What conditions will encourage non-Aboriginal educators to question an educational system that conforms to their epistemological and ontological beliefs? I was not able to amplify the voices of Aboriginal parents from the school, nor was I able to comprehend their silence and absence. Was disengagement a resignation to feeling subjugated by an institution that denied diverse world views? Or was their silence a potent statement against an established mainstream perspective of educa-

tion? These questions deserve more thought.

Second, I initially subscribed to a dichotomization of White as mainstream and Aboriginal as non-mainstream; however, this framework holds more potential to drive cultures apart than to invite them into conversation. The need to celebrate multicultural parent involvement and confront taken-for-granted practices is increasingly considered in the literature (González, Moll, & Amanti, 2005; López & Vázquez, 2005; Pushor & Murphy, 2004; Pushor & Ruitenberg, 2005). But because the literature on Aboriginal education tends to emphasize how Aboriginals are not like non-Aboriginals, little has been written to demystify the process of bridging these two perspectives. The significance of my research for me has been the clarification that Aboriginals and non-Aboriginals bring unique gifts to the table, but what conditions will encourage both groups to view their perspectives as complementary and workable within a system perceived as privileging non-Aboriginal ways remains challenging. Thus, a challenge for research is to identify practices that allow uniqueness to flow toward a confluence. Lengthy preoccupation with how alternative positions flow against a mainstream has not resulted in strategies that can be employed in schools. Unless new attitudes toward difference are developed, Aboriginal educational issues will be anchored in the doldrums. "We can work together," said Heidi, an Elder. But what is necessary for mainstream to become multi-stream? How we can learn from each other continues to be a compelling question.

Finally, my own cultural perspectives limit my ability to understand Aboriginal perspectives, which emphasized an important interpretive turn: rather than try to understand the other, I appreciated the need to first understand myself. Instead of thinking I must have "the answer" to Aboriginal parent involvement, I admitted I did not and could not know. The methodological implication is that non-Aboriginal researchers who adopt what I call intentional or directed vulnerability may create the necessary space for building positive relationships with Aboriginal Peoples based on curiosity about ourselves and each other. Assuming we must learn about ourselves may be more fruitful than assuming we have an ability to know others. How comfortable are educators or policy makers with questioning their assumptions? How well do we train teacher candidates to "not know?" I think more room should be made in policy circles and teacher preparation programs for discussion about intentional or directed vulnerability as practiced through

reflexivity and self-reflexivity, as well as in research arenas where cross-cultural research occurs. In-search must be a focus. Can such an approach help non-Aboriginal researchers *get it*?

NOTES

- 1 I use the collective term *Aboriginal* to refer to First Nations, Métis, and Inuit Peoples because the participants in this study invoked this term. I acknowledge this choice might be contested.
- 2 The term *parent involvement* generically describes all those in care of children, recognizing that among many Aboriginal groups, parenting of children is a community responsibility.
- 3 Martin (1994) defines Enlightenment in the following way: "A cultural and philosophical movement of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Its chief features were a belief in rationality and scientific method, and a tendency to reject traditional religion and other traditions" (p. 81).
- 4 The root of logocentric, logos, translated from Greek means "'speech,' 'thought,' 'reason,' 'word,' 'meaning,' 'statement,' 'explanation'" (Martin, 1994, p. 141). As Martin notes, the term has been used in various ways, but central to its meaning is the "principle of rationality or law that some philosophers think is responsible for the way the universe works" (p. 141).
- 5 Beeman suggests a mode of being called "attentive receptivity" (p. 7) that involves a "meander-knowing" (p. 7), which is set apart from being enacted in Modwestcult by embracing intuition and experience as a state of being in which a different form of knowing occurs.
- 6 The course name is a pseudonym to protect the anonymity of the school where the research was conducted. The pseudonym reflects the content of the course.

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